

The New Age of Warfare

by ilmiopassato

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Summary: COMPLETE. Sequel. Everyone thought the Human-Covenant War was over. Everyone thought there would be peace. But as human rebels and the Storm begin to turn their sights on the UNSC once again, Major Natalie Cooper is called upon to help break those plans. And yet another alien threat that no one has ever faced before looms in the shadowsâ€¦

## 1. Intro: Back in the Fray

Author's Note: Well, never say never, right? ;)

I honestly thought I was done with the Cooper stories after "The Fate of Humanity", but low and behold, between the "Forward Unto Dawn" web series, the recent new Halo novels that have come out, and most especially Halo 4, I found that my muse came back. As soon as I finished the game, I was viciously attacked by rabid plot bunnies, and so I had to start writing again. xD

All the usual disclaimers apply: I DO NOT OWN Halo, the franchise/the books/the games/other media. I'm just writing a story based off this incredible universe. And, like with the previous installments in the series, times/dates/settings may be slightly AU. Also like its predecessors, this story is rated T but tends to toe the line with M for language, violence, blood, gore, and some suggestive/sexual content (not graphic).

Important to note is that I have not read any Halo books based on the Forerunners, and I'm not yet finished with \_The Thursday War\_. So. I'm developing a storyline based on what I've read so far, and what I played in Halo 4. The rest I'm taking under creative license, since I have my own ideas of what I'd like to do with my characters in particular with regards to recent Halo universe happenings. So if it's a \_little\_ off main canon, don't freak. I am, however, trying to keep it as plausible as possible (say that fast five times). I went back and edited the final epilogue of "The Fate of Humanity" to fit Halo 4's timeline, so that, at least, should be good to go.

Anyway, without further ado, I give you Part 4 of the Cooper series (no longer a trilogy!). Hope you enjoy. :)

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Intro: Back in the Fray<strong>

WARNING! TOP SECRET! EYES ONLY!

SCANNING IN PROGRESSâ€|

â€|CLEARANCE GRANTED

/TO: Major Natalie M. Cooper, Commanding Officer 8th Engineer Battalion, 32nd Combat Support Regiment, UNSC Marine Corps

FROM: Rear Admiral Sarah Dartmouth, Commandant UNSC Concord Naval Air Base NA6, Pensacola, Florida, United States. North American Territory, UNSC Navy

SUBJECT: FILE ENCRYPTED

MESSAGE:

Major Cooper,

In addition to numerous reports of growing unrest in the Outer Colonies, courtesy of the neo-rebel movement springing up again since the end of the War, we've received a large amount of intel pointing to a possible revival of the fight against the Sangheili as well. This is all very troubling to the brass, to say the least.

I'm going to be frank with you, Major. I'm not sure how long this comfortable lull will last. It's surprising it's lasted as long as it has for us here on Earth, given what I've been told recently. If things end up getting too out of hand in the Outer Colonies again, due to either of these groups being hostile to UNSC forces stationed there, you may see a deployment coming up for your unit before the year's end.

Be ready.

Rear Admiral Sarah Dartmouth, Commandant UNSC NA6

/END MESSAGE/

## 2. Chapter 1: Times, They Are a Changin

\*\*Chapter One: Times, They Are a Changin' \*\*

\*\*1748 Hours, November 1, 2557. UNSC Concord Naval Air Base, Pensacola, Florida, United States. "The Games," Planet Earth. Prologue to the New Age of Warfare\*\*

Sometimes, I really hated my job.

It wasn't enough that I'd received countless wounds and injuries over the years â€" some pretty damn bad â€" in my career as a UNSC Marine.

And don't think the relatively new rank was helping me out too much with that, either. True, I was the new battalion commander for the 8th Engineer Battalion, and we were supposedly not the main frontline fighting force like the infantry units I'd been in in the past, but we all saw plenty of combat just the same.

Thankfully for us, though, these days, it was mostly training. But that didn't mean the stun rounds didn't hurt.

But, I guess it's best to start this story from the beginning.

\* \* \*

><p>"Major, watch out!"</p>

The shout came from one of the enlisted Marines beside me, and he sounded as amped as if this had been a real firefight. I reacted quickly, a skill honed in battle over years and years of being on edge across numerous battlefields, and dove out of pure instinct to the side. I landed with big "Oof!" as the air escaped my lungs, my heavy combat armor and gear weighing me down, making the impact harder. Suddenly I found myself facedown in the dirt, gaping at the ground when I realized the oxygen wasn't making its way into my body anymore. I felt something hit the reinforced barricade in front of me hard, and everything beneath me shuddered. Then I tasted copper in my mouth.

Well, that's not a sensation I've had in a while, I thought, spitting out the blood.

But I grinned to myself in that moment, too, despite it all. This beat being behind a desk or making repairs to a bombed-out city any day. This was what I'd always felt I was born to do.

With that thought in mind, a new wave of energy came over me. Adrenaline coursed through me, opened up my veins, dilated my pupils, readied me for action, and I pushed myself up off the ground and turned to the nearest Marine. "Gorreh! Find out where that ordnance is coming from, now! I want all companies to move in close in a V-formation! We will hold this ground!"

He looked startled that I'd even spoken to him. "Y-yes, ma'am!"

The young Marine quickly faced his fireteam, scattered up here on the ridge with me, while down below, the rest of the 8th Engineers were pinned down in a raging fight against holographic versions of both Covenant and human troops. Human rebels, that was.

I still had yet to go up against those kinds of soldiers in real life — humans, people like me. I knew the rebels were supposed to be inherently bad. I'd learned about them in my history classes in school growing up, and my own father had talked about having to fight them early in his Naval career. But it'd all seemed far away then, way back in the past. The only thing I had ever known was the war that had already been raging for two years by the time I was born, the war that had changed the lives of both my parents and myself — and hell, probably my own kids in a lot of ways, too. The Human-Covenant War.

Fighting aliens I knew plenty about. Neither the Covenant nor the

Flood made me think twice about killing them, with the exception of humanity's short-lived truce with the Elites and their followers. I didn't think I had the chops to kill a human being, though.

I'd been through a lot of tough shit in my career, had been in a lot of hairy positions and had had to make many hard decisions. I'd had to order two of my men to their deaths in the jungles of Ecuador, an event I still remembered vividly in my mind even though it had happened four years ago. I'd even taken down a lot of what used to be fellow Marines and allies when they'd been infected by the Flood. But that had been out of necessity; they had no longer been who they once were. They'd already been irrevocably altered, transformed into hideous, decaying monsters. People, though, real people, I wasn't sure I could handle.

Although, being in the Marines, I knew I one day might have to test that theory for real. With the Covenant no longer being a threat, Insurrectionists in the Outer Colonies had started to rise up again. It was only a matter of chance and the fact that we weren't an infantry unit that had allowed me to evade that question altogether up until now. I hoped that would last.

For now, I had to think up a plan to take on the hologram forms of enemy humans as well as aliens. The concept was as foreign to me as Covenant language, even though we'd been training with this advanced war games simulator for the last few years. It still felt strange to give orders to take out a unit made up of people.

I keyed my COM before I could dwell on it any longer. "Air support, you on station?"

"That's affirmative, ground. Who am I speaking to?"

"This is battalion actual. I want an air strike at the following coordinates, standby."

"Roger that, actual. Standing by."

I ducked momentarily as another artillery shell burst into the ridge a few meters away. I'd since moved from cover, but knew I had to find something else to stay behind. As commander of the unit, I was a high-priority target â€“ the war games program was built that way, informing its AI army of my location at all times with a huge red icon. There was nowhere for me to hide given that. Although it'd be a while before they could get past all of my Marines down below, the skilled enemy snipers would take me down in one shot if I let them. Either way, being in the open was never good.

"Major Cooper!" a Marine sergeant called as he jogged up the rugged terrain. "There's a cave down here just below the ridge that we could use for cover. You can direct the unit safely from there, ma'am."

I just looked at him for a moment and made my choice, then and there. Shaking my head, I replied, "No, Sergeant. I don't back down from a fight." I racked my weapon after pulling it off my back and gripped it tight against my middle. "As long as my Marines are out there on the battlefield, I will be, too. Let's get moving. We've got a long way to go to end this."

"Ma'am?"

I gestured to the empty 'Hog at my six, ready and waiting to be used. "We'll use the vehicle. Hop in. You're driving."

"What about the gun?"

"I'm riding shotgun, so you better find yourself a volunteer."

"Yes, ma'am." The Marine turned to his nearest squadmate and tapped her on the shoulder. "You, Melindez! Gunner, now!"

"Got it, Sarge!"

With a full complement and everyone inside, the hefty vehicle lurched forward as the Marine sergeant accelerated. For the briefest of seconds, a feeling of déjà vu hit me as I remembered my arrival on Heath five years ago, bouncing up and down potholes in the desert heat while Corporal Dandh drove me and Private Beesner to Bravo Company's CP. I found myself wondering why, in all the years since the war's end, no one could have invested in a fleet of Warthogs that actually handled better.

I gave an inward sigh. The more things changed, the more they stayed the same.

A third shell came screaming into the earth not far from our position, forcing all three of us inside the vehicle to react. The gunner let off a few startled rounds as she curled around the big weapon for cover, while I leaned across the overhead bar. The driver skillfully evaded the shot, though, so we didn't end up virtual paste on the landscape. That was always a plus.

Keying the battalion-wide COM once I recovered, I shouted into the radio, "Marines! Get that thing offline now! Gorreh, I need those coordinates to hook up to air so we can give them the most festive send-off to hell we can manage!"

I heard the young noncom let out a small bark of a laugh. "On it, Major! Painting the target now, wait one."

In the meantime, the Warthog continued to swerve and rapidly maneuver out of the way of even more incoming ordnance. The AI must have zeroed in on my position, then, because there was no way it would near entirely ignore the rest of the vast battlefield for one lone jeep otherwise. If something wasn't done soon to change the situation, I was cooked. And that would effectively end the war game in a failed mission.

Luckily for all of us, Corporal Gorreh finally came through. His hail came less than a minute later.

"Ma'am! Target acquired! Coordinates zero-one-one-five by six-two-niner-niner. Acknowledge."

"Received, Corporal. Great work," I answered. Then I quickly hit the channel for our air support once again. "Flyboys, battalion actual. The job's ready for you now. Coordinates are as follows; the target's that big arty gun that's giving us a load of trouble down here. Take it out!"

As I relayed the artillery battery's position to the pilots, a fifth shell suddenly exploded way too close for comfort, tossing all of us out of the 'Hog upon impact as the vehicle was blasted off its right side tires and towards the left. Now I knew for sure that I was the target.

I landed in an ungraceful heap of gear and flesh a couple of meters away from the crater site, momentarily dazed and aching. There was ringing in my ears for a good several seconds, and my vision was going in and out for a time, too. Still, when I was well enough to check my HUD, I saw that I wasn't listed as down and out yet. "WIA" flashed in panicked yellow across the screen, but all I needed to know to get up was that I wasn't considered KIA.

I vaguely wondered what sort of virtual injury I'd received, but that wasn't my main focus now. I still needed to find out what was happening with the target, and I needed to check up on my Marines as well. Hitting the COM, I said, "Sergeant, Lance Corporal, what's your status?"

"I'm out, ma'am," the sergeant who'd been driving the 'Hog replied. "KIA from that blast."

"Dammit," I said under my breath. "Melindez?"

"WIA, Major, but not dead yet."

"Okay, good. Follow me, then. Sergeant, you just sit tight till this is over. Shouldn't be long now."

"Affirmative, ma'am."

Moving quickly across the field in a low crouch, the lance corporal and I managed to find ourselves some additional cover in the form of more reinforced barricades — they were spread throughout the battle site, lucky for us. From there, we could just barely see what was going on with the arty gun way across the valley of the ridge. Itching for a better view, I tapped the side of my helmet twice to zoom in on the designated area. Our HUDs were already painting the whole emplacement in red, alerting all of the Marines to stay clear of the air strike.

"This is Flight Xeno oh-four, coming in hot! Friendlies, stay clear and enjoy the fireworks!"

It wasn't long before the sound of two Broadswords flying with thrusters activated overhead enveloped the area. I couldn't even hear the rattle of our and the enemy's MGs anymore. The twin birds jetted past us so low that I felt the air get hot. This was as visceral an experience as a real fight — and it'd been designed that way. What we'd gotten out of our war games program was the latest in simulated combat — state-of-the-art software available exclusively for Earth before it was shipped to the other colonies. This was my first time taking part in the testing of the new version, and so far I was damn impressed.

A wide grin formed on my face when I finally got to see — and hear — the results of the air strike. Even from this far away, with my zoomed in HUD I got a front row seat to the show. The large artillery battery was hit dead-on with four missiles from the Broadswords, and

less than a second later, there was a tremendous detonation as the whole gun went up in red-orange flames and smoke. Down below, I heard all of my Marines simultaneously cheer.

Then the pilot's triumphant voice came through the COM. "Flight Xeno oh-four reporting. Target neutralized." He paused for a moment, then added, "Battalion actual, road should be clear now for your Marines. Good luck."

I was still wearing a smile as I replied, "Roger that, oh-four. Thanks for the assist." Opening a battalion-wide channel, I yelled, "Okay, Marines! Gun battery's out of contention! Let's see if we can gain some ground. Companies, push forward!"

The lance corporal and I waited behind cover for a minute longer while I watched the five hundred Marines under my command begin to close in on the AI rebels and Elites. I was so amped up from adrenaline and excitement that I forgot the first cardinal rule of being in combat — be aware of your surroundings at all times. Stupidly, I emerged from cover with my weapon to bear but my thoughts on the air strike, and didn't pay attention to the fact that I was now out in the open. Like many green newbies fresh out of boot and in their first firefight, I ended up learning my lesson the hard way.

The shot seemingly came out of nowhere, and no one saw it coming; I know because if it had, I would've been warned by my subordinates. But for this, there was no sign at all. It was just me getting up one minute, then getting punched hard in the chestplate the next. And shortly after that, I was flat on my back on the ground, disoriented and in a ton of pain.

Then, suddenly, the ground, the sky, and the whole environment disappeared. The lights came back on in the simulation chamber, and a booming male AI voice overhead said, "Commanding Officer in the field KIA. Exercise Operation terminated."

It took me a while to regain my senses, but even then, I remained lying there on the ground, at a loss as to how I'd just allowed something like that to happen. I was a major, in charge of an entire battalion, and a combat veteran of the Human-Covenant War — and I'd just made a green recruit mistake that had ended the sim for everyone.

Was I losing my edge?

Before I could dwell on that further, I saw a gloved hand appear in front of me. It was Lance Corporal Melindez.

"Here, Major. I'll help you up," she said.

I stared at her hand for a moment longer before I finally lifted my right arm up and gripped it. I found myself grimacing as she pulled me up. My right side was the one I'd badly injured in Voi four years ago, and I still had some pain in that area even now. Pulling me up by my arm and shoulder like that had mildly irked it. I stood lamely once I was on my feet, gently massaging my right shoulder and rubbing my chest where the stun round had just hit.

"Fuck," I muttered as the lance corporal went to form up with the

rest of the battalion. This wasn't going to go down well with the commandant.

### 3. Chapter 2: Wrap Your Head Around That On

#### \*\*Chapter Two: Wrap Your Head Around That One\*\*

After I got out of the sim and dismissed the battalion for the day, I went back into my office while everyone else went home to study the stats of the war game. It hadn't all been bad; all in all, each of the four companies under my command had done well, and casualties weren't too high, considering. I'd "lost" about twenty-five Marines in the battle, not including myself, which for a unit this size wasn't considered too significant.

Still, I cared about the people I led, and I didn't want the same thing to happen in real life one day. A day that might come sooner than I'd hoped, if the message I received from the base commandant was anything to go by. It popped up on the holoscreen in front of me just as I was reaching to turn it off.

What a way to end the evening.

I let out a sigh after I read it and leaned back in my chair, rubbing my eyes. So much for the war being over. It seemed that since things had finally "finally" ended four years ago, everyone had been pushing hard to start up another war, keep things interesting. The rebels, the Elitesâ€œall I wanted was to have the time with my family I thought I'd already earned ten times over during the Human-Covenant War. Time I'd earned in blood, sweat, and tears I wasn't prepared to spill again so soon.

In a lot of ways, we were all still reeling from the fighting that had recently ended. The only reason I wasn't an emotional wreck most mornings or waking up in the middle of the night from nightmares was because of the meds I was taking for it. Willis managed to get more sleep than me, usually, but he had memories that haunted him, too. Even Gabe had occasional issues with what he'd had to endure in St. Louis when it was bombed by the Covenant. The twins were the only ones without battle scars, since they'd been born after the war had ended.

Now that I was getting older, I was starting to realize how naïve I'd been as a young lieutenant and later a captain. I'd thought galactic affairs would settle down once the Human-Covenant War was over. I thought those bastard Elites would finally leave us the hell alone. And I thought Colonials in the Outer Colonies would feel more unified with Earth and the rest of humanity after we'd all been on the brink of extinction as a species together. I guess not. As soon as one big, nasty fight wound down, it seemed more and more were beginning to pop up.

I was left feeling more than a little dejected as my holoscreen powered down. Not just at my own performance earlier today, but with the galaxy at large. Before turning out the lights, I spent a moment staring the picture of my family on my desk. Willis and our three kids smiled back at me.

Tonight, I'd get to go home to them and see them. But in that moment,

I wondered how long it would be before I was separated from them all again " and if I could handle something like that for a second time.

\* \* \*

><p>"Hey," my husband said to me as I walked in the door. He leaned in to give me a quick kiss, and I kissed him back before looking past him for Gabe and the twins. Since I didn't see them, I raised an eyebrow at Willis.<p>

"Kids?" I asked.

Willis flipped a thumb behind him. "In our room, watching cartoons." He looked me up and down. "What's wrong, Coop? You look upset. And you're late."

The frown on my face wasn't something I could conceal. I drifted over to the couch in the living room and sank down into it, rubbing my temples this time. Seeing my reaction, Willis frowned, too.

"That bad?"

"Might as well be."

He sighed as he took a seat beside me. "What?"

"Is thirty too young to be thinking about retirement?"

That finally got him to loosen up a little. He chuckled. "In most professions, that'd be a 'yes'. Why?"

"I screwed up bad in the sim today." I folded my arms across my chest and looked straight ahead. "Andâ€œ|I'm probably getting deployed soon."

There was a moment of complete silence, and then Willis swallowed, his tone lower than before. "Where? How soon?"

I shook my head. "I don't know yet, Will. I should get a data packet tomorrow so I can brief the troops." I shifted my posture a bit, uncomfortably. "So far, all I know is that it'll be in the Outer Colonies. Way out."

It looked like Willis was about to reply, but both of us turned suddenly at the sound of Liam's voice coming from the bedroom.

"Daddy! Come here!"

My husband and I exchanged a quick glance. Then he started to get up with a sigh. I put my hand on his leg, indicating for him to stay put.

"I got it," I said. I checked my watch as I stood. "It's past eight. I'll put them to bed and we can talk more about it later."

"Okay."

I quickly pulled off my combat boots and padded into the bedroom, where all three of our kids were crowded onto our bed. Gabe was staring wide-eyed at the holoscreen, while the twins, Liam and Olivia, were barely hanging on to consciousness beside their older brother, both yawning. It was a sight that brought a momentary smile to my face, despite how my day had been.

"Hey, guys. Come on," I said, turning off the screen. "Time for bed."

"Mommy!"

Being the most alert, Gabe was first to bound off the bed to hug me, while the twins followed close behind. I gave them all a big squeeze and a kiss on their heads.

"Hi, babies. I missed you today." I pulled back and pointed to the door. "But it's still your bedtime. All of you."

"But Mom - " Gabriel whined.

"Nope. No buts. Now."

"\_Aw\_. "

"Gabe, make sure your brother and sister get to their room, then you get to yours. I'll be there in a minute to tuck you guys in and turn off the lights."

"Yes, Mommy."

The process ended up taking another twenty minutes, thanks to reading stories. But that was fine by me. I knew what it'd been like to be separated from my kids before, when Gabe had been a baby and even as a toddler. I counted myself lucky now that I could be there for all of them, at least in the evenings. And I knew, too, that more likely than not, I'd be leaving them again not too long from now.

The thought hurt.

\* \* \*

><p>When I finally emerged from the twins' and then Gabriel's room, I walked over to the kitchen to pull a beer out of the fridge. I cracked open the bottle and took a drink as I moved back towards the couch. I found Willis still sitting there, nursing a beer of his own. I looked down at him with a half smile before I sat next to him.

"Great minds."</p>

"Yep."

I relished the comfortable seat after a long day in the field. I still felt a little sore from it all. But more than anything else right now, I felt uncertain.

To break the sudden silence that developed, I took a second generous swig of my beer and said quietly, "I just never thought it would happen again so soon."

"What?"

"Jumping back into the fray. Another war. I thought..." I trailed off, searching for the right words. "I thought after the war with the Covenant - and the damn Flood - that it was all over. For good." I gestured at the living room with my bottle. "I thought I'd live this life every day. Come home to you and the kids, help rebuild Earth. I thought all the combat stuff was done. Over with." I took another drink, then added, "I don't mind the war games at all. But having to do it for real again...I don't know."

Sensing my mood, Willis tread carefully with his words. "Well, this is what we signed up for, Coop. For better or for worse."

I shook my head for the second time that night, emphatically this time. "No. I signed up to fight the Covies. Because of what they did to my dad. Because of what they did to your brother. I never signed up to fight other human beings."

Willis paused to set his beer bottle down on the coffee table in front of us. Then he looked me straight in the eyes. "It'll be okay, Cooper. There's no guarantee you'll have to fight the rebels. There's every reason to think it'll just be more of the same old Covenant. Elites, Jackals, the works."

I snorted. "It's the Outer Colonies, honey. Who else would we be fighting?"

"You know as well as I do that the species that made up the Covenant are still out there. And they haven't exactly grown to love us, even post-war."

"Still, I got my money on the rebs."

Suddenly one beer didn't seem enough to cover the multitude of feelings I was left with. Anger, frustration, hurt, sadness. Regret. Confusion. I was hitting the full spectrum in one single moment, and I wasn't quite sure what to make of it. "We spent six years of our lives fighting to defend humanity. To save it. Now I'm being told that that's exactly who I have to go up against. I just..." I threw up my hands, at a loss for words. "It almost makes me wish we were still fighting the Covenant."

Willis sighed loud beside me, then took a drink. Rubbing the bottle between his hands, he said, "I don't know what to tell you, Natalie. It sucks, I'll agree with that. I'm not happy about it, either. But it's not like you - or I - have a choice. We have a duty to do what we do, to do our job. That's what it's always going to come down to, any way you cut it."

He stood and brought his empty bottle to the kitchen, leaving me alone for a minute to swirl it all around in my head. I still couldn't make heads or tails of it, but I did see the sense in what my husband had said. Maybe I was getting too soft, too used to the easy life now that the war had been over for four years. Maybe it was time I just learned to suck it up again, like I'd always done before.

But I thought of my family and the life we'd built together over the last few years, and I couldn't help but feel a sharp sense of loss over the fact that things were about to get turned upside down for

all of us yet again. It made a lump form in my throat, though I didn't want to admit it, or let Willis see.

When I felt his hands squeeze my shoulders from behind, though, I realized how silly I was being. Willis was always able to see my true feelings, to judge my moods. It was one of the things I loved about him, and one of the things that had kept our marriage so strong over the years. I slowly leaned back against his chest and closed my eyes, relaxing in his grip.

"Trust me, Cooper," he whispered in my ear. "I promise you, it'll be okay. We've been through a whole lot worse before, and we came out of it. It won't be any different this time, either. You'll see."

As usual, I wished I could believe his words. But for the moment, at least, they made me feel more at ease.

#### 4. Chapter 3: Step it Up

Author's Note: Just a small note on updates for this story. I'm currently working both a full-time and part-time job, so free time is pretty scarce for me at the moment. :P Expect updates about once or twice a week for this story. Sometimes it may be more, and I'm going to try really hard to not let it be any less than that.

Anyway, here's the next chappy. Hope you enjoy!

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><p><strong><span>Chapter Three: Step it Up<span>\*\*

I woke up early the next morning at 0400 hours, and made my way as quietly as I could out of bed so I didn't wake Willis. I pulled on my PT clothes – a long-sleeved, gray UNSC-MC T-shirt and dark blue shorts with my last name stenciled on both – and some running shoes, swallowed the two pills I took every morning – one for the nightmares, one for birth control – then peeked in quickly on my kids' bedrooms. As I'd expected, all of them were fast asleep – a good sign that none of them, including Gabriel, had had problems during the night. Feeling more reassured, I left the house at a slow jog to warm up, planning to do my real physical training once I got on base. It was going to be a rough morning, but I wanted it that way.

Winding my way through the dark streets of military housing at this hour was a nice way for me to relax. I'd always loved running; it was perfect to get your mind off things. When I ran hard, everything else was shut out and I focused only on my breathing; the rapid rise and fall of my chest, the intense thrum of my pulse in my ears, and the pounding of my feet on the pavement. Before long – and with all the current frustrations I had to work out – I found myself running a lot faster than I'd intended.

Seventeen minutes later I was on base, sweating and breathing hard but pumped from the exercise. It wasn't something I was unused to; I did PT and ran six miles every morning without fail, just never this early, and never as hard as I was about to make it. To ensure that I was not, in fact, losing my edge, and that I absolutely would not return to the line of duty without being prepared for it, I made a

pledge to myself: from now until we deployed, I'd push both my Marines and myself harder than ever. When we fought whatever it was the galaxy wanted to throw at us -- former members of the Covenant, human rebels, or anything else it could cook up -- we'd be ready.

I started by heading to the female barracks and stripping off my PT clothes piece by piece. I shoved them in a locker for now and pulled on my fatigues instead. Then I headed for the armory.

Going into combat as a senior Marine officer was different than when I'd been a platoon leader and then company commander. Technically, I wasn't supposed to be in the direct line of fire anymore, although that was always dependent on what type of environment and battle you were fighting in. Things could change in an instant in the field, something I knew too well, and no place, no matter how far back, was ever really that safe. Still, in recent years, I'd learned to brush up on my skills with mid- and long-ranged weapons as opposed to the assault rifles and submachine guns I'd enjoyed earlier in my career, and had come to the conclusion that the M395 DMR was my favorite. Just the right amount of kick, range, and rate of fire.

After putting on full gear -- armor plates, pack, and everything but the helmet -- I slung the rifle diagonally across my back before snapping on my web belt around my middle. I holstered my sidearm there and, satisfied I was all geared up and ready to go, set off outside again.

I ran five more miles that way, and it was a real bitch. Most of the way through my heart was pounding so hard I thought my chest would burst, and my lungs and legs were working overtime between all the added weight of equipment and the pace. Still, I pushed, determined to prove that I could still do it, that I was still a Marine through and through, and that no matter what, I wouldn't complain about it. I was here to do my duty, just like Willis had said, and I'd follow through like I'd always done - even if I had reservations about fighting colonials.

By the time I was done, I nearly collapsed in the big grassy training field on base, sweat pouring out of every inch of me, but I landed happily on my ass when I sat down and grinned.

I still had it in me. The fire wasn't out.

\* \* \*

><p>Before heading to the showers and then to my office, I finished up some calisthenics just as the sun was beginning to make its way above the horizon. I did push-ups, sit-ups, and pull-ups after taking just five minutes to recover from the run. Only then did I allow myself the luxury of getting clean.</p>

I stood under the spray of warm water as I lathered up and rinsed for three minutes, timing myself. Over the last few years, I'd gotten way too used to constant hot showers -- and long ones. The only times I went without were during our extended field exercises, where we'd spend a week or two training in the field. And those had been too few and far between lately, something I'd need to make sure I modified as of now. All the creature comforts I'd enjoyed post-war were things I needed to start getting used to not having again, before I was forced to go cold turkey on deployment.

After that, I changed into a fresh pair of fatigues and headed to the office. My aide, Staff Sergeant Joshua Porter â€“ one of the only carry-overs from my former unit, Bravo Company of the 102nd Battalion, 603rd Infantry Regiment â€“ was already there and waiting, datapad in hand. He saluted me as soon as he saw me walking down the hall towards the room.

"Major Cooper, ma'am," he said. "Good morning."

I saluted back and replied, "Good morning, Staff Sergeant." I gestured to the pad in his hand before going in. "Something urgent I should know about?"

"No, ma'am. Just more of the same old paperwork." He sighed. "Almost makes you miss the war, huh?"

I gave him a pointed look. "Be careful what you wish for, Porter. You might just get what you want."

"Ma'am?"

I took the datapad from him and began reading. There were updated files on everything from battalion personnel to training schedules to supply and logistics â€“ all things I either had to deal with myself or delegate this morning to my company commanders. "You remember the Covenant, don't you, Josh?"

"Yes, Major. I do."

"Well, whatever temporary friends we managed to make out of the Elites towards the end of the war are no longer that disposed to humor us. I received word last night from the commandant that we're getting sent out again shortly."

The NCO's eyebrows shot up. "We're getting deployed again? Against the Covenant? Where?"

"Outer Colonies," I answered as I took a seat behind my desk. "I don't know when yet or how soon â€“ or who it is exactly that we'll be fighting. I'll know more when I read this pending message the admiral just sent me."

"I uh, I don't know what to say, ma'am."

I glanced up at him again. Like all of us, he'd matured a lot in the last four years and was no longer the fresh-faced young corporal I remembered when I'd first met him, but a twenty-seven-year-old staff sergeant in charge of a squad of his own, when he wasn't busy helping me. I let out a sigh.

"Don't say anything then, Staff. Just make sure you send out these new orders to the battalion â€“ tell them that starting today, we're altering our training schedule. We're going to work around the clock to make sure we're ready for whatever it is we're going to go face. PT will start every morning at 0500 with an eight-mile run; that'll be 0630 for today, given the hour. Twice a week, we do six miles in full gear instead. Then calisthenics, showers, weapons training at the range, obstacle courses and war games. Got all that?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. Then let the company commanders know. And tell them that today at 1400 hours, there will be a briefing for the captains and their XOs. Orders are in, Staff Sergeant, and we need to prepare to ship out."

## 5. Chapter 4: Crap Just Got Real

\*\*Chapter Four: Crap Just Got Real\*\*

After scarfing down a late lunch in the mess, I gathered what I needed for the briefing and checked my watch. T minus three minutes. It was time to head for the room.

Everyone knew the reason I'd called them in today, but they didn't know the details yet. That was up to me to supply. Though I hated breaking the news to them so close to the holidays, it was something we were all going to have to deal with as a unit. I'd gotten so used to being home for Christmas with Willis and the kids the past four years that I'd forgotten what it'd been like to be starving, dirty, sweaty, and alone on some random planet during this time of the year. I guess in a few weeks, I'd relearn how it felt again.

The thought hit me harder than I'd expected. I swallowed the lump in my throat just before I stepped inside.

"Attention on deck!" one of the captains called out. All four company commanders and their XOs quickly stood at attention by their seats, staring straight ahead as I walked over to the front of the room. I motioned for them all to sit again.

"At ease," I said. Pulling my datapad from the breast pocket of my uniform, I laid it out on the table in preparation, then gave each of the officers before me a look. "You all know why you're here, so let's get started. I just received a message from the commandant, and we're up for duty this time. From today until we deploy, we're going to be ceasing all reconstruction operations effective immediately, and focusing instead on combat training. I trust you all remember how to use a gun. If not, the schedule updates I gave you will get you back up to fighting shape fast."

I didn't wait for a response, but instead continued, flicking the datapad on and pressing lightly on an icon on the screen. A three-dimensional hologram of a red-blue planet appeared above the table. "This, Marines, is planet Khan, in the Outer Colonies. It's on the very fringes of what's left of UNSC space that the Covenant didn't totally annihilate." I twisted the image to the silver-gray side of the planet. "This is what the alien bastards managed to glass of it. The rest we were able to save, through the help of both UNSC forces and the local militia. But don't thank your lucky stars quite yet, because there's still plenty of alien activity in this sector, and it sounds like the locals were far from grateful for the assist."

I tapped on a part of the floating hologram of the planet — the southern-most tip, where an expansive continent of reddish-brown earth and dots of green forests and streams appeared as the map zoomed in. "In three weeks' time, this is where we'll be stationed

" UNSC Outpost Columbia. Few troops have been here since the end of the war, but lately they've been getting harassed more and more by both the local population and the alien pirates and illegal arms traffickers. There's more than you can imagine for a supposed time of peace. And every day, it's looking more and more like those weapons are eventually going to be aimed at us.

"Marines stationed there already are reporting guerilla style hit-and-runs in the middle of the night, occasional sniper activity, and even mortar attacks in and around the base. So far no one's been killed yet; it looks more like someone or something is attempting to scare off our presence there. But things are definitely getting uncomfortable, and several Marines have been mildly injured. So the brass has decided that it's time to step up our forces there, and send a light but firm message to any hostile groups that we're there, we're not going away, and they need to stop." I looked up. "Questions so far?"

One of the XOs, a first lieutenant in charge of second platoon, Delta Company, raised his hand. "Ma'am? What are we looking at in terms of enemy numbers here?"

I snorted as I folded my arms across my chest. "I wish I knew that myself. Intel hasn't been too helpful or too forthcoming on this one. Apparently this is not the first of the surviving Outer Colonies to have a problem like this, but whatever ONI knows, they're keeping to themselves at our expense. Other than what I've been able to glean from a few declassified reports from Outpost Columbia's commander, we're going in pretty much blind on this one. I don't like it, and I'm sure no one here does, but there's not a whole lot we can do. What I've told you about the nature of some of the more recent attacks is all we get, unfortunately." I pressed down on the datapad to turn the hologram off. "We have, however, been granted additional numbers ourselves to compensate for this. The 904th Special Infantry Battalion will be joining us on this excursion, whatever it might turn into."

Another hand went up, this time from Captain Reese Kelson, Alpha Company's CO. "Major, what are we officially being tasked to do there, exactly?"

I smirked. "Officially? We're there to help with rebuilding efforts. We're bringing the tools and playing the part. Unofficially, we're there as backup and a show of force in case things get hot. So be prepared for anything and everything. We may have to switch gears at a moment's notice. That's why we're starting up again with intense combat and weapons training until the day we leave."

A young blond Marine on the other side of the table raised his hand, too. He was Bravo Company's commander. "So how are we supposed to be treating the locals, ma'am? Are they with us, or against us?"

I'd been asking myself the same question since I'd received the orders this morning. I was still grappling with the answer and debating how I felt about it. More than anything, it left me feeling dirty and underhanded. This wasn't as clean-cut as the Human-Covenant War had been. Not by a long shot. "That's the million-credit question, son. For now, they're allies, or at least they claim to be. We treat them the same as any humans and focus our attention on the alien groups for now. But that's not to say that those in the Outer

Colonies regard us highly, and they may even end up being more trouble than the ex-Covies. So we keep our guard up, at all times. Trust your instincts. You start to sense something funny is going on, alert me right away. Anymore questions?"

A fourth hand went up. "Ma'am? Are we authorized to use lethal force if we have to? Against other people, I mean."

The room got dead quiet in an instant, and that's when I realized how new this was for all of us. I wasn't the oldest in the room, despite my rank, but even those that were couldn't remember far back enough to a time when humanity was at war with itself, rather than extraterrestrials who came from outside the UNSC's sphere of control. We'd all been too young or growing up or, in my case, not even born yet when the Covenant War had started; anything prior to that was a void, besides the snippets we'd been taught. It wasn't something we'd experienced for ourselves, though our parents had.

Now I understood why my dad had never been too keen to talk about it. I began to wonder now how many people he'd had to kill before the Covies attacked, if any. I quickly pushed the thought aside.

"Yes," I answered solemnly. "But only if you get attacked first, and only as a last resort. And that doesn't mean the rest of the population is suddenly a free-for-all. There's a difference between civilians just living their lives and those who take up arms against us. Be sure you've made that distinction beyond a shadow of a doubt before you aim that weapon at a fellow human being. Is that clear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. That goes for all of you." I unraveled my arms and leaned forward across the table, resting both of my palms on the edge. "I know this is going to be a tough mission. The truth is, we're being asked to take a lot of things on faith, and we really don't know what it is we're getting ourselves into. It's not an enviable position. But we're going in well-equipped, and we'll be prepared. We've got a reinforced battalion and the Marines already there to look to if we get into a tight spot. So we're not alone in this. We'll be okay, and you'll do fine. And whatever it is that's attacking our men out there, we've got to keep at bay."

I straightened up. "That's all I've got for you, Marines. Relay the orders to your companies. Dismissed."

\* \* \*

><p>I left the briefing feeling more drained than usual. Part of it was how early I'd gotten up this morning, and how hard I'd pushed myself during morning PT. My muscles were sore and aching. But I knew that wasn't the whole story; it was more than a physical form of exhaustion. I was also worried, impatient, wondering what the hell it was exactly that we were going to encounter on Khan. And if it was something my men â€“ something <em>I</em> â€“ could handle.

When it came to aliens, I already knew the answer. Rebels, thoughâ€| I just wasn't sure what to make of them quite yet.

Thankfully, I did have something to look forward to at the end of the

day, though. My best friend, Major Oliver Hayden, was in town.

"Well, well, well. The apprentice finally becomes the master," he said with a grin as he walked up. He gave me a quick hug before we pulled apart. "How's it going, Battalion CO Cooper?"

I smiled back. "Not too bad, most of the time. You?"

"Can't complain, although I'm not too happy about the upcoming deployment." He let out a sigh. "The 904th has seen a lot already. We're not exactly itching to get back into it."

My eyes went a little wide despite myself. "Is that where you've been all this time? In the Outer Colonies?"

Hayden nodded, looking older and more haggard than he had when I'd last seen him several months ago on Remembrance Day, before I'd become battalion commander. I supposed I'd changed a bit since then, too. "Yeah. Why don't I tell you over a drink at the O-Club? It isn't really stuff for the faint of heart, and it goes down better with a foam mustache."

I laughed. "Holy shit, buddy. I was wrong. You haven't changed a damn bit."

\* \* \*

><p>It was while I was staring into my second mug of brewed amber liquid that I started to wonder whether or not I should call to ask Willis to pick me up. It had taken Oliver and I this much to get buzzed enough to talk business. We'd both been through a lot of shit together during the Human-Covenant War, so much so that swapping war stories felt more too-hard-to-talk-about than something fun to do to pass the time. I snorted to myself. I couldn't believe I'd felt that way at one point early in my career. I certainly didn't think that way now.</p>

"So? Outer Colonies? You piqued my interest earlier, so don't back out now," I said, not slurring but not too eloquent, either. "What's the deal over there?"

It took him a moment to answer. Being bigger than me, he was handling the two beers a lot better, but he seemed more subdued â€“ no, despondent â€“ than usual. "I guess I should tell you up front, since you're not going to remain blissfully ignorant about it much longer." Although he didn't move a muscle, his eyes shifted towards me. "It's bad, Cooper."

That kind of answer required another generous drink to take in. "The ex-Covies, or the rebels?"

Oliver was the one to snort this time. "Both. But the Covies are something we've dealt with before. A lot. I know my way around them like the back of my own damn hand. It's the rebels I can't wrap my head around."

"Funny. I've been thinking the same thing for the last two days now."

"Well, you're not alone. All of us are busy doing the same thing. It justâ€¦ doesn't make any sense. Why now? Some of these colonies got trashed by the Covenant. Bad. And we've been helping them rebuild, and resupplying them, and giving them aid at every turn. And what do they decide to do with that? Attack, harass, annoy. Because the UNSC is 'imposing on their way of life', or something." He snorted again. "Well guess what? They wouldn't even have a life at all if it weren't for us. If we hadn't helped them pull their own asses out of the fire."

"To be fair, I do know that a lot of them feel like we just left them to die. There might've been times during the war when we could have reacted quicker to help."

He shook his head. "These guys had bones to pick with the UNSC way before that even began, Cooper. And besides that, the Covies were on us way too damn fast. You know that. We did try in the Outer Colonies. We did. But early on in the war - and throughout most of it, really - we were outgunned, outmaneuvered, out everything. It took all we had to protect important Inner Colonies, and then they still found Earth. Hell, even after the Elites allied with us, it was still a close call. You were there with me in Kenya when the Pelicans came to pick you up. Both of us almost bit the big one."

I threw my hands up. "All right. Well, shit. If you've been there and you still can't make heads or tails of it, I don't suppose the rest of us will anytime soon. I was hoping to get some sort of insight before we all pack up and go. I hate flying blind. I hate leading my Marines blindly even more."

"You and me both, Natalie." Hayden took a long pull of his beer before setting it down again. Then he said in a low voice, "They're fierce, Cooper. Real fierce, more than the Jackal pirates and almost as much as the religion-crazy Elites. It's just a step below fighting the Covies most of the time."

That was something that was hard to swallow. Fiercer than Elites? I'd fought all of the species of the Covenant and then the Flood for over six years. Never had I met an enemy fiercer than Elites, more destructive than the Brutes, or more maddeningly frightening than the Flood. I couldn't even believe that there was a small but noticeable faction of humans that were close to being up to par with all that. But the look on my buddy's face said it all.

If I'd had any lingering doubts that this mission would be a walk in the park, they'd just evaporated in that one moment. A vague sick feeling enveloped my throat as I thought of the implications. The words came out before I could stop them. "I don't think I can do it, Oliver. If the people on that planet turn on us, I don't thinkâ€¦ I can't fire my gun at another person. I just can't. That's what I fought all my life to preserve. My family and the human race. It's wrong."

Hayden's retort was sharp and quick, and entirely unlike the man I'd fought beside and bled with for the last dregs of the Covenant war. "If you want to leave your kids without their mother, that's your business. But you're my best friend, and I don't want to see that happen to you. So you better be ready to pull that trigger when you need to." He took another drink, looking straight ahead. "I wouldn't trust the rebels as far as I can throw a feather. They're bad news,

Cooper. And in their own minds, they've got a laundry list of things to be mad at us for." He turned his glance over to me now. "When they see your uniform, they won't hesitate. And neither should you."

This was too much. It wasn't even something the booze could help with. "So those are my choices? Get killed or kill someone else?"

My friend let out a sigh and took yet another drink before turning to me again. "Don't you miss the Covies and the Flood?"

## 6. Chapter 5: Preparation

### \*\*Chapter Five: Preparation\*\*

Two days later I awoke with a start in the middle of the night. Inhaling sharply, I sat straight up, feeling the dampness of a cold sweat on my temple as I listened to the harsh thud of my heart in my chest for the next several seconds. When I tried to recall what the hell I'd dreamt about to get me so agitated, though, I found that I couldn't quite remember.

I frowned as my body slowly began to relax again. It was the bittersweet effect of the meds that caused the memory blank, I knew. Part of me was annoyed at the fact that I couldn't figure out what I'd been dreaming about. The other part of me was grateful - it was never anything worth being realized. But for some strange reason, I got the sense that it had something to do with the upcoming deployment...and what I'd talked about with Hayden a couple of nights ago at the O-Club. I shivered involuntarily as I lay back down in the darkness.

I was hoping I hadn't woken Willis up, too, but it turned out I had. He stirred beside me and then opened his hazel eyes a crack, giving me a questioning look through an obvious sleepy haze.

"Coop? You okay?"

"Yeah," I replied as I nestled against him again. "Bad dream I guess, but I don't remember it."

Now it was his turn to frown. I could see the outlines of his expression in the dark. "You haven't had one of those in a while." He sighed, sounding a little more alert now. "You're worried about the mission, aren't you?"

"Aren't you?"

"Of course I am, honey." He turned and pressed his lips on my forehead. "I don't want to see you go. I know the kids don't, either." I heard him swallow. "It's...going to be hard not having you here. We're not so used to being split up anymore."

"I know."

"It just seems like it's coming up so quick, and there's a lot of unknowns." My husband slid his hand on my cheek as he looked at me. "I want to be sure you'll be safe, but I know I can't ask you that."

A half-smile formed on my face as I leaned in to kiss him. "That's it? No 'everything will be okay' pep talk this time? Maybe I should be worried."

He kissed me back while his own lips curled upward slightly. "I didn't say it won't be okay. I just want you to be careful."

"I always am, Will. You know that. I have four big reasons to make it back home in one piece." I kissed him again, deeper this time, knowing I was starting something now that we'd want to finish. But it was also something I needed, and I knew he did, too.

The news of the mission was stressful for both of us. It wasn't something we'd had to deal with for a long time. Soon we'd be separated again, with no guarantees on a reunion, and so I wanted to make every moment we spent together until then count.

As he returned the kiss and moved closer, Willis murmured, "Is this a bad time to be doing this?"

I smirked while I pulled at his shirt. "This a great time to be doing this. We're just going to have to be very quiet."

Willis chuckled and smirked back. "I love you, Cooper."

"I love you, too."

\* \* \*

><p>Much later in the day, I tried not to think of my late night with Willis and the dream I'd had as I walked over to the firing range, DMR slung across my back and helmet in one hand. Thankfully for me, this morning hadn't been one of the ones I'd designated as a heavy PT day; though I'd gone on a long run with my Marines at dawn, at least it hadn't been in full gear, like it would be tomorrow. Still, after all that and training, I was feeling sluggish by afternoon, so while I'd sent the battalion off to practice their marksmanship, I jogged quickly back to the mess for some much-needed coffee.</p>

It was then that I started to wonder how I used to keep up with everything just fine a few years ago, and why despite pushing myself even harder than usual lately, I still always felt just one step behind. I chalked it up to finally parting ways with my twenties and looked instead to the range, filled with the tens of Marines I led. I spotted one in particular at the helm of it all and made a beeline for him, pulling on my gloves as I walked.

The dark-haired, dark-skinned Marine captain came to attention and saluted when he saw me coming towards him. "Major."

I glanced up and saluted back, shifting my helmet to my other hand for the moment. "Captain Harris." I stopped beside him and turned to look at my Marines again. It looked like this was Delta Company's portion of the grounds. All of them were firing off a variety of guns, both close and long-range, so I spoke up louder against the cacophony. "So? How are things going?"

Harris folded his arms across his chest. "Well, ma'am. Just made it down here to D Company after checking on the others. Seems like nobody's forgotten anything from the war. Still crack through those

targets right perfect."

I allowed myself a small grin as I pushed my gloved hands into my trouser pockets. "That's good. You know what they say, Shawn..."

"Once a Marine, always a Marine, ma'am?"

"Yup. And every Marine's a rifleman first." I pulled my own gun down from my back now and checked the load. "It's like riding a bike. You don't ever forget."

Captain Harris shrugged his shoulders. "I guess it depends how long you've been fighting."

"Are the kids fresh from boot that easy to spot?"

He grinned back. "You know it. My mom said you could always tell who's wet behind the ears - they forget the simplest things." Shawn shook his head. "She was a good woman, my mother. And a damned good Marine, too. She was killed on Jericho VII when I was seven, along with the rest of her squad. It's why I joined when I got old enough."

"Yeah," I replied sadly. "Sometimes it boggles my mind how many people we lost in that fucking war. Can you believe those guys in the Outer Colonies haven't been sated yet?"

"I'll never understand it, ma'am. They saw the absolute worst, too, everybody in the outskirts. Except for Earth and Reach, the rest of the Colonies had it pretty good in comparison. Don't know why they'd want another fight right now in the shape they're in."

"Well, hopefully it won't get that far again. Maybe they'll come to their senses."

The captain shot me a look. "You really think so, Major?"

"Damned if I know, Shawn. But all it takes is one side deciding to put the past to rest, once and for all. The UNSC didn't start this, but I do believe we can end it. We just have to be willing to try."

"You know, historically, diplomacy with the rebels didn't work out too well. Ma'am."

It was my turn to shrug. "Things are a lot different now, Harris. We've just been through a full-out galactic war. Together. That may not've changed some people's minds, but I think it has even to the die-hards - at least subconsciously. Maybe it's convenient for the black market types to stick with the arms-dealing Jackals or the religious nutjob Elites, but that's just business. Deep down, they know they're not like \_us\_. Human. People. There's something to be said for being a part of your own species."

My battalion XO glanced at me sideways. "Did you hate the Covenant, ma'am?"

"With every damn fiber of my being, Captain. But towards the end of the war, I learned to distinguish between those who'd earned my hate,

and those who hadn't."

I thought of Atalom 'Kuatee, the tough Elite bastard that hadn't come to mind in a long time, but whose death had still left some sort of inexplicable void in my life. We hadn't been friends, but we had had a mutual respect of each other's abilities and prowess in combat, and we'd understood each other, at least on some level. As soldiers. I couldn't quite say I missed him, but I did miss some of the lessons I'd learned from fighting alongside him during the battle for Earth. I turned back to Shawn.

"I guess I believe that if I was able to forgive and forget everything the Covenant did to me, to my family, for even the brief moment we had to ally with the Elites to end the war - enough that I didn't instinctively feel the need to shoot every one of them on sight - then that's the same thing we can strive for with the rebels. We as a species were able to do that with aliens who wanted to totally and completely wipe us off the galactical map. I know we can do that with others who are just average people, like us." My XO followed as I began to walk off closer to the range, searching for a spot to practice myself. "All the rebs have to do is learn to get past the uniformed faÃ§ade, Harris, and see that we're people, too."

## 7. Chapter 6: Old Friends and a New Start

**\*\*Chapter Six: Old Friends and a New Start\*\***

**\*\*1609 Hours, November 8, 2557. UNSC Concord Naval Air Base, Pensacola, Florida, United States. "The Reunion Tour," Planet Earth. Prologue to the New Age of Warfare\*\***

The two machine guns going off right beside me made it hard to think, let alone formulate anything resembling a plan of attack for five hundred Marines, but it was an environment I'd gotten very used to working in during the war. I blocked out the noise and concentrated, knowing that these battle simulations were far more than training exercises now - they were a prelude of what was possibly to come in the Outer Colonies, on Khan.

As always I hoped things wouldn't actually pan out that way, but when it came to the lives of my Marines, I wasn't going to hedge all my bets on wishful thinking. I was an optimist, had been all my life despite the many curveballs I'd been thrown over the years, yet even that wasn't going to stop me from being prepared for all contingencies. The Human-Covenant War had proved a lot of terrible truths to me, and I took them to heart in spite of my nature.

Even if my own unit hadn't been enough of a motivation on its own, I had three young lives counting on me to come home to them when it was all over, too. I vowed that I'd do that no matter what it took, just like I'd promised to Gabe the night Willis and I had left for Kenya. I'd made it back to him once; I'd make it back to him and my youngest son and daughter again.

I tapped the COM and said, "Harris? What do you see? You got eyes on?"

"Negative, ma'am. Rebels are crawling all over the place, though."

Busted up old 'Hogs galore, even an older model tank. Looks like they're really packing the heat today, Major."

"Well, that just means we've got to lob it back." I broadened the channel to our virtual heavy weapons detachment. "Ordnance hot?"

"Ordnance confirmed primed and ready, Major Cooper, N. M. Standing by for command," the AI said flatly.

I heard the smirk in my XO's voice when he added, "You sure you're prepared to dole out the damage, Major? Might want to try talking it out with them first, no?"

"That's the ideal, Captain, but there comes a time when those options get swept off the table. And that's when you attack the Marines of the 8th Engineers."

"Oorah! I like that."

I chuckled. "Thought you might. I'm guessing you know what my next order's going to be, too."

"Yes, ma'am. Assign coordinates and light 'em up."

"You're good." I stood from my crouched position and moved to better cover behind a computerized tree - but for all intents and purposes, looked, felt, and smelled real. "Let's get this done, then, Harris. Tell Charlie Company they're up, and I expect results. I want the rest of the companies boxing the rebs in on the sides. We'll compress if we have to, but we will snuff them out."

"Understood. Give me one."

"Shit!" I cried as a bullet whizzed past. I pressed my back harder against the tree for a second, then leaned around the thick trunk to see where the shot had come from. Four rebels in the distance stared back, weapons raised. Then more lead pierced the air as I took cover again. "Shawn, I'll give you two! We've got company over here!"

"Acknowledged. Diverting a squad to your location now. Bravo's third platoon is closest to you, ma'am."

"Got it!"

I stood motionless for another several seconds while I felt the tree currently saving my ass get torn to splinters on the other side. If I stayed here, I knew I wasn't going to remain alive in-game much longer - and I wasn't exactly itching for a repeat of my last performance in the sim. Waiting just a few heartbeats longer, I timed it in my head and then leapt out of cover the moment the virtual rebels paused to reload. Though it wasn't an action the DMR was supposed to be used for, everything was fair game in a crunch, and I fired off two quick bursts before fully scrambling out into the open. It was the impromptu, express version of suppressive fire.

But it worked. Now a few meters away, I jumped behind a large downed log just as the enemy fire started up again. As a bonus, when I checked my HUD, the friendlies Harris had sent to help out were now

closing in on my six as well. Bringing my rifle up fast, I propped the barrel up on the top of the felled tree and picked targets, feeling a fresh surge of hope rush through me now that I knew I would soon have others at my back. I hesitated for the briefest of seconds, then squeezed the trigger.

My first target was a man of medium build yet tall, a poorly randomized body proportion projected by the sim AI. I watched as the rounds ripped into the left side of his hip, spraying fake blood with an animation as close to reality as you could get - or what I imagined the reality of such a hit would be. I'd only ever seen Marines get scorched with plasma weapons or pierced with needlers. Bullets we'd only ever dealt with with the Flood, and they'd usually gone for the more brutal, up-close-and-personal melee assaults. This was a whole new ballgame.

And I didn't like it one bit. I turned away and winced as the virtual man did a real impression of a scream of pain, one I'd heard many times before coming from the Marines beside me during the war. I'd even yelled out something similar myself on numerous occasions. Never had I been the one to inflict it, though.

When the simulation AI determined I'd made the kill, I focused my weapon on the next. This time it was a figure with a full visor on the helmet, though I could tell from the body type that it was a woman. I hesitated, reconfiguring my aim to look for additional targets, so damn hardwired to search for something alien-looking rather than human. But I found none. More rebels had appeared beside the first few that I'd seen, but of course, not one of them was a Covie or a Flood form. All of them were men and women.

Though only an extra couple of seconds had gone by, the AI decided I'd taken too long to take my next shot. The rebels zeroed in on me and snagged me in the right shoulder twice, the pair of bullets hitting me so hard on my armor that I flew back, though they didn't penetrate. Grunting, I connected solidly with an old tree stump on the simulated forest floor and didn't move much after that. For a moment, I was in so much pain I couldn't believe it. Flashing blue lights on my HUD indicated the corpsman had been called to check out my wound - both virtual and real, since I'd been hit right where I'd been badly injured back in Africa.

In the meantime, I heard a quick rustle of brush and tree limbs as the other Marines arrived. There was a long string of gunfire, multiple weapons going off at once. Then the computer indicated that the half dozen rebels who'd been aiming at me before were now dead.

One of my Marines, Second Lieutenant Bolshik, gripped the shoulder I wasn't currently holding and curled against.

"Ma'am?"

"I'm...all right," I rasped through gritted teeth. "I just got...tagged in exactly the wrong place."

The young officer didn't seem to know how to respond to that, so instead he licked his lips and said, "Okay. Closest corpsman just radioed in, Major. He's coming over here now."

That got my attention. "He?" Bravo Company had been the one closest to me when I'd gotten hit. Their medic was female. It didn't seem to fit.

"Yes, ma'am," the lieutenant replied. "Bravo's medic was indisposed, so we got Alpha's. That's why it's taking him so long to get -"

"I'm on it, Lieutenant," a voice interrupted. I didn't get a good look at his face until he crouched in front me, but the blue eyes fit, the short black hair fit, and so did the faint smile on his face as he looked me over. "Damn, Major. We've got to stop meeting like this."

I literally did a double-take, wondering who the hell was playing tricks on me with the AI, and why. "Reynolds?"

He chuckled a little at my expression. "Yes, ma'am. The one and only, in the flesh. What've you managed to do to yourself this time, huh, Cooper?"

A small snort escaped me. I couldn't help it. "You tell me, Doc. You're the medic."

True to his nature, Reynolds was already done checking out the hit by the time I finished speaking. "Tweaked your shoulder, nothing too bad. It's just hurting because -"

"Because it got popped out of alignment and jabbed with flaming shrapnel from an exploding tank on the Tsavo Highway," I said as I took in a deep breath to ease the pain. "I know it was four years ago, but I do still remember that, oddly enough."

"Hard to forget." The corpsman pulled off his gloves as he stood. "I say we call off the rest of the exercise for you for today, ma'am. Medic's orders."

I gave him a look. "And when have I ever listened to your expert advice, huh?"

"Pretty much never, but you're going to today. The battle's gone on long enough anyway."

"Fine," I said with a sigh. "But in that case, you're done, too." Opening a private channel to my XO, I added, "And you, Harris...you're telling me how and when you recruited the best medic in the Corps for us, and why I wasn't notified about that before now."

\* \* \*

><p>It wasn't every day we got in a new replacement, especially since with the end of the Human-Covenant War four years ago, recruitment had been at a standstill the last few years. And very rarely did anything new regarding my own battalion escape my notice. Getting Corpsman Michael Reynolds back on board without my knowing it was a difficult feat to achieve indeed, and as I stood with my arms folded across my chest in the mess hall a half-hour later, freshly showered in a set of fatigues, I found myself determined to get to the bottom of it.</p>

"So? Who should I be starting with first? You, Shawn? Or Michael?" I asked.

Captain Harris shrugged, all amused nonchalance. "Up to you, ma'am."

I sighed and took a sip of hot coffee before staring directly at the medic. "Doc?"

Reynolds looked like he was trying very hard to hold back a grin. "Yes, ma'am?"

"I want it out, now. The story. I think I've been kept in the dark just long enough to get this to work, am I right? How'd you two do it?"

"Don't worry. It wasn't any oversight on your part, Major. We actually managed it through a personal connection of sorts." Glancing over at Harris, Michael continued, "The captain's sister works at the same hospital I do. Or, did, I guess. But I didn't know until my daughter got sent to her for treatment. Dr. Harris is a pediatrician there."

"Uh-huh. I'm following so far," I prompted. "Is your little girl okay, by the way?"

"Yeah, thanks. So anyway, my wife brought her in one day with a stomach bug, Dr. Harris treated her, and they got to talking," Reynolds said with a slight smile directed at Shawn. The captain grinned back and picked up the tale from there.

"And that's when we discovered the connection, ma'am," Harris said to me. "When Ms. Reynolds came back to my sister's office for a check-up, my sister let slip that we were getting ready to deploy again soon. Our esteemed medic here heard about it through the grapevine, knew there was a vacancy and not many taking up those slots anymore, so..."

"So I reenlisted yesterday," Reynolds finished. "Got assigned to your battalion, Major. Being a nurse, I've kept my medical skills up more than enough, and if I'm real honest with myself, I've missed being in the service a lot. So I decided to come back full-time."

"And here you are," I said.

"And here I am, ma'am."

A wide grin formed on my face as I stuck out my hand. "Hell. I don't give a shit how we got you back, buddy. It's good to have you home."

Doc Reynolds took my hand and shook it, his expression matching my own now. "Good to be home, Major. And thanks."

\* \* \*

><p>The rest of the day's training went smoothly, and with the help of my XO, I got to cut out a little early, too. After the war had killed both his parents, just like me, Harris was left with just his

sister for family. He told me he got to see her often enough since she lived so close, but knew that soon, I wouldn't be able to spend any time at all anymore with my kids, for who knew how long. With those words, he convinced me to leave the 8th Engineers in his expert care, and I left in the early evening. The sun had already gone down and I was tired, but content.<p>

Though real people staffed the daycare on base, the front desk was manned by a low-model AI. For security, it asked me to state my name and rank, as well as the children I was picking up. I heaved a sigh, having done this many times before and wishing it'd instead been a person who recognized me by sight.

"Major Natalie Cooper. I'm picking up Gabriel, Liam, and Olivia Hawk."

"Identity confirmed. Please step inside."

I walked in and scanned the room, looking for two little kids with brown hair, and a slightly older one with his father's golden brown. They weren't too hard to spot - Gabe was in corner putting a puzzle together with some friends, while Liam and Olivia were coloring at a nearby table. Ever the shy one, my youngest son kept his gaze down as I stepped beside them, only looking up when his twin sister jumped up from the table.

"Mommy!"" she yelled. Olivia threw her arms around my knees and squeezed. I leaned down to kiss the top of her head, a smile appearing on my face without any conscious thought.

"Hi, Livy," I said. "Did you have a good day, sweetie?"

"Yeah!" Letting go of my knees, she took hold of my hand instead. Thankfully it was my left, so I didn't wince; my right side was still sore from the bad hit today in the sim. I could feel her small hand tugging on my wedding ring. "Come see, Mommy. Liam and me drew pictures for you and Daddy."

As I inched closer to the table, I moved over to Liam's side to gently grip his little shoulders and gave him a kiss on his cheek.  
"Hi, baby."

"Hi, Mommy."

"What did you and Livy draw? Let's see."

Liam gave me a big, proud grin as he turned around to show me. "Look. A bear!"

"Ooh, that's scary. Liv?"

Holding up her drawing, I saw a shape that looked distinctly like some sort of aircraft, with a smiling brown-haired pilot inside, presumably herself given the length of the hair. "That's me!" she cried emphatically. "Flying like Daddy does, in a Pewacan."

My smile widened. I knew Willis was going to like that when he saw it. "Very nice." I straightened up then, turning around. "Okay. It's time to go, guys. Grab your pictures while I get your brother."

Gabriel was placing down the last piece of the puzzle when I tapped him on the shoulder. He whipped around and, without saying a word, gave me a hard hug.

"Hi, Mommy."

"Hi, sweetheart."

My oldest son didn't let go, but instead held on a little tighter for a moment while I hugged him back. Though he didn't know it, it was the same thing he'd done four years ago as his father and I had left for the very last fight with the Covenant - and the Flood. It seemed my firstborn had a sixth-sense about these things; though Willis and I hadn't yet told the kids the news, I got the feeling that Gabe already knew something bad was coming over the horizon, something that was going to take me away from him again. It made my heart sink to think what that did to him, and the twins. And what it'd do to me, too.

I hadn't been separated from my kids for four years, and though I'd been forced to deal with it a lot in the past, it was always something I'd hated. It was a kind of buried but constant, deep hurt that could never be assuaged until I was home again, and close to the three little beings I loved more than life itself.

With that unhappy thought, I reluctantly pulled away from Gabe, then ruffled his short, light brown hair - a genetic trait he'd gotten straight from Willis, unlike his green eyes that mirrored my own. "Ready, kiddo?"

He looked up at me with them in confusion. "For what, Mommy?"

"To go home, silly." I picked up his backpack for him from the chair beside us. "Come on. We need to get there before your dad does, or he'll wonder where we all went."

\* \* \*

><p>Tonight it was Willis who came home later than usual. The kids seemed just about out of energy for the night, though they all perked up when the door opened and all but tackled their father in the doorway. Willis hugged and kissed each of them on their heads, then gave me a quick, "gimme a sec" look.</p>

Ten minutes later Gabe and the twins were tucked in their beds. My husband was just shutting the door quietly on the twins' room when I met him in the hallway. He gave me a small smile as he took me in his arms and kissed me. "Hey."

I kissed him back with a grin of my own. "Hey yourself. Long day?"

We kissed lingeringly two more times before he finally pulled back to answer. "Yeah." Then he let out a sigh, rubbing a hand over his short hair. "I have some news, Coop. And I don't think you're going to like it."

"Well, I'm not sure much fazes me anymore, so have at it."

Willis motioned me back into the kitchen, so I followed. I sat down on a stool at the counter and looked at him while he continued to stand. He folded his arms across his chest and blew out a breath.

"I found out this afternoon that my air wing is getting put on standby. Looks like we're going with you to Khan."

I frowned even before fully taking in the message. "That's not right. I would've known about it if it was you. It would've been in my data packet the commandant sent. They have rules about you and I shipping out together, you know."

"I know. I remember us skirting by them in Lienz."

When I glanced up, I could see the faint smirk on his face, and couldn't help but match it. "Then you don't remember right, because all I remember is coming to your rescue when your Pelican crash-landed in that field. And we didn't exactly skirt the rules...maybe just bent them a little."

"Uh-huh. Right." His expression clouded. "Well, either way, this leaves us in a bind."

"You mean the kids."

"Yeah."

Slowly the ghost of a smile faded from my face. The senior officer in me was busy asking a million strategic questions like Why are we getting sent in with an air wing if we don't anticipate any fighting?, while the mother in me was suddenly frantic, wondering what to do with Gabe and the twins.

If I thought they'd take my leaving hard, it'd be even worse now that Willis was going, too.

Willis stopped the pandemonium in my head by breaking the sudden silence with another sigh. "We'll have to take them to my parents' place on Mars. There's really nowhere else for them to stay. I know all your siblings are on duty elsewhere themselves, and so's my little sister."

"You think we can get leave to do that so close to departure?"

"They have to, Natalie. We're legally obligated to get this sort of thing taken care of before we leave. Not just morally, or out of common sense."

"I guess that solves our dilemma, then - your parents. You know I'm okay with that."

"All right." Willis braced himself against the counter in front of me then, his gaze directed downward. Oddly, in that moment, I saw - not for the first time - where Liam got many of his mannerisms from.

"It'll give us a chance to finally go back home for a bit - our real home, and show it to Gabe and Liam and Olivia. That still doesn't make it any easier to break the news to the kids, though."

## \*\*Chapter Seven: Take Off\*\*

The Corps wasted no time making sure Willis and I had our family affairs in order before deployment; just three days later, we were packed and ready to go with tickets for the next flight heading out to Mars. Once again I handed over the battalion to my XO, Captain Harris, who was very thankful I'd only be gone a short time and would soon be back in charge. In thirty-six hours from departure, Willis and I both had orders to report back on base. It didn't leave us much time at all with our kids, but we'd make do, as we always had.

For now, though, the flight was still a few hours away, and I had something important I wanted to take care of before I left - like stopping by the memorial wall that had been erected soon after the Human-Covenant War's end. I wanted to pay my respects to those who hadn't made it this far, but whom were still remembered, and never forgotten.

It'd been some time since I'd been here last. A month, maybe more. But I'd been coming here more frequently since Remembrance Day back in March. That had been my first time - before then, I'd been unwilling to participate in anything that even mentioned the war. Too many hard, painful memories, and not enough time to come to terms with them. Now, though, close to the eve of my next send-off to battle, I felt compelled to return.

Dressed in fatigues for the flight, I pushed my hands in my battledress pants pockets as I started to walk my way down from one end of the wall to the other. There were a lot of names - too many damn names. It would take some time to pass by the entire thing's length. But I'd gotten up early this morning and given myself an hour to go through it all. It just was something I felt I needed to do on my own.

I got to the spot on the wall most important to me a full twenty minutes later. In small print to fit all the names, the words "102nd Battalion, 603rd Special Infantry Regiment" were engraved on the giant slab of dark marble, and I took a moment to run my fingers against the letters. In a lot of ways, my heart would always belong there, with the men and women I'd served with for the final bloody year of warfare against the Covenant. It still seemed funny to me that now, after all that, I was being sent out against my own.

"Hey," a voice said behind me then. Startled, I turned around fast, old reflexes proving they were still active in my mind when I reached instinctively for a sidearm that wasn't on my hip - although it would be in just a couple of weeks. Frowning, I shoved my hands back in my uniform pockets and relaxed a little when I saw who it was.

"Good morning, Doc."

"Good morning, ma'am."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Little early for you, isn't it?"

"I could say the same, Major."

"TouchÃ©."

I heard him step closer as I turned back around to face the wall again. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched him come to a halt beside me. The medic's stance stiffened when he glanced up at the huge wall of stone.

"Have you been coming here a lot since the war ended, too?" he asked quietly.

I wasn't sure how to answer that at first. We stood there in silence for a minute before I replied, my voice going low as well. "No. Not before Remembrance Day this year, I mean. Now, yeah, when I can."

Reynolds gave a deep, tired sigh. "We all went through a lot of rough shit for a long time, Major."

"Too much shit, Doc. Way too damn much." I finally heaved a sigh of my own and folded my arms across my chest, feeling old emotions starting to bubble up again, though I'd long since exhausted my tears for all that had happened. Now, I just felt numb. "Look at all those names, Michael. Then there's Lewis...and my baby." I firmed up my stance, trying hard not to give in too deeply to the memories because I knew I'd be crushed and lost to them if I did. Instead I swallowed and said, "Enough blood's been spilled over the last thirty-odd years. I can't believe there's people out there who still want more, after all this."

"It's definitely not a sentiment I would have expected, either, ma'am."

"It makes me absolutely furious sometimes if I think about it too long. That's why I don't, and just take it in as just another damn thing we have to do."

Another moment of silence passed; it seemed Doc Reynolds didn't have a response to that one. I ran a hand over my face in the meantime, forcing my emotions down once more. "I'm going to try to stop this brewing war with the rebels before it escalates. I'm tired of fighting, Michael. I'm so fucking tired. I feel alive in it; I know it's where I'm supposed to be if I have to, and I will always do my duty, no questions asked. But if we can prevent more bloodshed, with aliens or with our own, all the better."

Slowly, the medic nodded. "I understand, ma'am." He scratched the side of his head. "I see enough of this place already, maybe too much. I'll leave you to pay your respects." He suddenly came to attention and saluted. "Major."

I snapped to and saluted back. "Doc." Relaxing my posture, I added, "I'll see you when I get back."

"Yes, ma'am. Have a safe flight."

Even after the medic left, I lingered in front of my old unit's section of the wall for a long time. I thought a lot about the unborn child I'd miscarried in the last months of the war, the child Willis and I never got to see or hold, but who'd remained painfully locked in our hearts since the loss. I also knelt down for a moment beside my late best friend's name, pulled my dogtags out from under my

shirt, and pressed them against the stone where First Lieutenant Dean Lewis's name was carved.

After that, I found I just couldn't stay any more than that. I'd had enough for one visit. I placed my tags beneath my shirt again and turned to walk back home to my family.

\* \* \*

><p>A few hours later, Willis, Gabe, Liam, Olivia, and I were all at the spaceport, waiting to board our flight. With large, heavy olive drab sea bags on our backs, my husband and I searched for our gate while trying to push along the kids at the same time. It was a bit of a challenge, but we managed.</p>

"Will?"

"Huh?"

"It's over there."

I pointed to an area several meters down from where we stood. When I squinted, I was able to read the brightly lit, translucent sign.

"Mars," Willis read aloud. "Nice going, Coop."

"That's what I'm here for."

Willis grinned and leaned over to give me a quick kiss on the lips. Then he hefted the pack on his back again. "Okay. Let's head for the Mars sign, guys."

"Daddy?" Olivia asked, cramming herself between us as we walked.

"Yes, sweetheart?" my husband answered.

"I'm hungry."

"I know, baby girl, but we're almost there. We'll eat on the flight."

"Mommy?"

"Yes, Gabe?"

"I'm hungry, too."

"Me, too, Mommy," Liam chimed in.

I exchanged a glance with Willis as we rushed. He shook his head, though the smile hadn't faded from his face. He turned back to the kids.

"Don't worry, guys, we're all going to eat soon. Cooper?"

"What?"

"Tickets."

"Oh. Here."

\* \* \*

><p>Somehow we were able to make it through the chaos and get both our seven-year-old and our two three-year-olds - as well as ourselves - situated and seated on the flight. I let out an exaggerated sigh as I took my place, sandwiched between Willis and our daughter, with Liam and Gabe on the other side of their dad. Willis took my hand and squeezed, knowing I was already getting anxious about being in any sort of flying craft.<p>

He leaned in and whispered, "It's okay, honey."

I snorted. "I'd feel marginally better if it were you doing the driving. But someone else? Not a chance."

My husband smirked at me. "I've always found it funny that you can take on a Brute, or an Elite, or even a wave of Flood in a fight, but you've never been able to even handle the thought of a flight."

"Oh, ha ha. That was very clever, Will."

"Thanks. I try." I could tell by the tone of his voice that he was enjoying this entirely too much. "I wonder, are you aware that you got married to a pilot?"

"Shut up."

Olivia tugged on my uniform jacket then, interrupting our good-natured exchange. "Mommy, look." She pointed to some part of the aircraft outside that I didn't recognize and grinned at me. "We're on a plane!"

I nodded and tried to smile, though all I really felt was squeamish. Willis immediately caught on and laughed. That earned him a look.

"I hope you realize she gets that from you, by the way," I said.

"Yeah. Clearly," he replied smugly.

## 9. Chapter 8: Storm Before the Calm

### \*\*Chapter Eight: Storm Before the Calm\*\*

The Red Planet looked beautiful from orbit, I had to admit. I hadn't been back home since I was newly pregnant with the twins after the war, so it'd been a while. For a moment I managed to forget I was on an aircraft, and I turned to Liam and Gabe. Seated closest to the window, Olivia already had her face plastered to it as she stared at the view outside.

"Boys, come look," I beckoned. Gabe got up first, moving to press his face against the window plate beside his sister. Liam tried to see from behind them, but being shorter, couldn't quite make it. He

turned back and made an exasperated face at me, so I picked up my youngest son and sat him on my lap so he had a better view.

"See, guys," Willis said, leaning in. "That's Mars. That's where Mommy and Daddy are from."

"Wow," Olivia replied. "You live here?"

"Yup. Used to," Willis answered.

"It's really red!"

"It's actually not too different from Earth," I corrected. "Or, at least, what Earth was like before the war. There's less people and less water, but there's trees and parks and schools and workplaces here, too."

"I've been here before," Gabe announced, though his tone made it sound like a half-question. He probably didn't remember much from his last visit, as he'd only been three years old at the time.

"You have, buddy," my husband replied. "You were little, though, and your brother and sister weren't born yet. We came to see Grandpa and Grandma."

"Are we seeing them today, too?" Liam spoke up.

"Yup. This'll be your first time. We're going to see them a short while after we land."

"When are we landing, Daddy?"

"In about two hours."

\* \* \*

><p>All five of us spent the taxi ride to Willis's parents' house taking in the sights. For me and Willis, it felt indescribably good to be back in the neighborhoods and streets where we'd grown up - places we hadn't seen for years, but recognized and which felt familiar to us all the same. For the kids, everything was new.</p>

Surprisingly, and thankfully, the Human-Covenant War hadn't done much to Willis's and my hometown of Emerald Pines, although there had been a lengthy planet-wide battle here with the Covenant while we'd been busy fighting on Earth. Because of faulty communications and the UNSC's near-total focus on humanity's home planet, neither of us had gotten the news until after the war had ended. That was what had prompted our immediate trip out to Mars, to see how Willis's parents - and our planet - had fared.

I didn't need to come back to check on my parents, though, since my dad had been killed early in the war when I was four, and my mother had died in the bombing of St. Louis in 2553. Willis must have noticed how quiet I got when we passed by streets close to my childhood home, and he gave my shoulder a squeeze.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "I know it's hard for you whenever we come back."

"It's okay," I replied tiredly. "I like coming home; I like seeing it. It just...feels empty now sometimes, to me. My brothers and little sister have moved on, and my mom and dad and older sister...aren't here anymore."

"I get it." He made a face. "In a lot of ways, my family felt like that too when Matthew died. It felt good to be home, but didn't at the same time."

"Yeah. I remember."

Willis's baby brother Matthew had only been seven years old when his school's transport ship was destroyed by the Covenant. Willis and I had both been eighteen when it happened. It had been the event that had prompted Willis to join the Marines, and had also engendered a heavy burden of guilt he'd carried for most of his life until we'd had Gabriel.

"More bad memories from the war, huh?" Willis said then, forcing me from my thoughts. He sighed. "Let's just forget about that while we're here. The kids get to see my parents, and we'll get to spend another day and a half with them here until we ship out. We'll stay positive, and remember all the good that came out of this."

He offered me his hand between us, and I took it. It was true that despite how hard it had been, the war hadn't produced only bad memories. It'd also brought Willis and I closer together, in ways that wouldn't have been possible in peacetime, and it'd given us Gabriel - and later the twins.

\* \* \*

><p>Chaos erupted at the Hawk household when we finally arrived. There was a flurry of hugging and kissing and even a few happy tears on my mother-in-law's part when she saw the kids. She gave me a big hug, too, but it didn't compare to reception Willis got once he'd made his way into the house with our bags.</p>

"William!" Willis's mom cried.

Willis gave her his signature easy grin. "Hi, Mom."

"It's so good to see you, sweetheart."

"You, too. Where's Dad?"

"He went out to get dinner for all of us with your sister."

I watched as my husband's eyebrows shot up. "Jamie's here?"

"Yes. She just got home a week ago. She's on leave for two weeks from the Navy."

Willis suddenly grinned ear to ear. "Wow. It'll be really great to see her."

"She'll be happy to see you, too," his mother replied. "Now come, have a seat in the living room. Tell us what you and Natalie and all my grandbabies have been up to."

\* \* \*

><p>Things had calmed down a bit in the evening. Willis and Jamie had exchanged a huge bear hug when she finally got home, and Willis and his dad clapped each other on the back. Dinner was a large celebratory feast, much bigger than I'd been expecting, so by the end of it, the kids were all yawning and the adults were stuffed. We all retreated back to the living room where the fireplace was going, and simply took some time to relax and be together. Olivia was enjoying being on one couch with her grandparents and aunt, while Willis and I sat on the other. Liam was curled up in his father's lap, leaning against his chest, while Gabe was sitting with me. We still hadn't told them yet why we'd come on the trip, and the minutes seemed to stretch.</p>

Finally, I let out a sigh. "Okay. I'm not sure how much Will's told you, but we're shipping out in two weeks."

"Where to?" Willis's dad asked.

Willis started to answer, but I cut him off. "Outer Colonies. I'm sorry, but that's all we're allowed to say for now."

My husband shot me a look, and I gave him an apologetic one in return. I ranked him and thus had the full brief, and I didn't want him inadvertently spilling more of the beans than we were able to. It was my responsibility as senior officer to make sure that was kept under wraps.

"Which one of you is leaving?" Jamie asked.

"Both of us," Willis answered this time. "That's why I was hoping you guys would do us the favor of watching the kids while we're gone."

"Of course," Willis's mother said quietly. "It's just upsetting to see the two of you leaving again so soon."

It didn't escape my notice that three little heads suddenly perked up at the words being exchanged. Gabriel was old enough to understand all of it, and even if the twins weren't, they understood the gone part.

Gabe glanced up at me first. "Mommy? Are you and Daddy leaving?"

"Yes, Gabe."

\_"No." \_Gabriel immediately turned and buried his face in my neck, hanging onto me tight. "You promised. You promised you were never going to leave again."

I heard his voice crack, and my heart broke at the same time. Because I had promised him that. I'd even believed that myself. And though it hurt me to do this to all my kids, it hurt with Gabriel the most because of everything he'd already been forced to endure during the war. I patted his back as small wet spots started to hit my shoulder, and I kissed his hair.

"I know I did, baby. I'm sorry, but we have to."

Willis moved closer, though he had his hands full as Olivia ran over to join her twin brother in his lap. He hugged the twins tighter and chuckled, trying to keep things light. "Guys, it's okay. We're only leaving for a little while. We'll be back before you know it, and in the meantime, you get to spend some time with Grandma and Grandpa."

That didn't seem to smooth things over very well, and we soon had three teary-eyed kids to attend to. It took a lot of assurances and some of Grandma's hot chocolate to finally calm the situation. Shortly after, Willis and I put the kids to bed in their rooms. When we finally stepped back out, only Jamie was left in the kitchen.

"Mom and Dad couldn't take the heat," she said with a weak smile. "They retreated to their room, too."

Willis sat down across from his sister at the table and ran a hand over his face. "Crap. I feel bad now. I shouldn't have sprung this on them. I thought...doing it in person would make it a little easier."

I took a seat beside my husband. "You mean your parents, or the kids?"

"My parents. I don't think it ever would've been a good time to tell Gabe and the twins."

Jamie sighed. "Yep. They were probably going to bawl their little eyes out no matter the time or place."

"I hate doing this to them - and to Gabe again. He went through so much shit during the war, Jamie. I hate giving him another memory of me and Coop leaving him behind."

I placed a hand on Willis's back and ran it up and down. I knew exactly how he felt, because that was everything I was feeling myself.

"It'll be fine, big bro," Jamie responded. "Hopefully whatever you're doing in the Outer Colonies won't take long, and you'll be home soon. Both of you." She paused to take a drink from her own cup of cocoa. "It's not like this is going to turn into another widespread fight for survival like before. It's isolated to the backwaters out there. My guess is you won't be there longer than a few months."

I wished that were the truth, but somehow I doubted it. Momentous events seemed to follow us like the plague, and I had a feeling that whatever it was we were going to find out near Khan, it wasn't going to be any sort of quick clean-up job.

## 10. Chapter 9: No Time Like Snow Time

Author's Note: This chapter actually ended up coinciding nicely with Christmas, so I decided to theme it that way. :)

Hope you enjoy, and happy holidays everybody!

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Nine: No Time Like Snow Time<strong>

I didn't spend too much longer in the kitchen with Willis and Jamie after that. I was beat, from both the trip and how things had gone this evening, and I knew Willis would probably want some time to catch up with his sister on his own. Squeezing his shoulders, I gave him a quick kiss and left the room.

Once in our bedroom, I started to unpack a few things before it all hit me at once. This was really happening. Tomorrow was going to be the last day I'd see my kids for who knew how long. Suddenly I found myself sitting down heavily on the edge of the bed, head in my hands. I wasn't sure how I was going to handle doing this again, but I had to.

"Natalie? What's wrong?"

The sound of my husband's voice surprised me - it hadn't been more than fifteen minutes since I'd exited the kitchen. I glanced up at him with a forlorn look. His expression softened as he took a seat next to me and put his arm around my shoulders.

"Jesus, Cooper, you look like you just got hit by a bus."

He said the words lightly, but in some ways, I did feel like that. Emotionally at least.

"I'm sorry. I'm just taking this...a lot harder than I thought."

"Leaving the kids?"

I nodded. It didn't even cross my mind to wonder how he knew exactly what was bugging me, since he always had.

He sighed. "I know. It's going to be hard all around. I'm going to miss them a lot, too. But they're in good hands, Coop, and hopefully we'll be back home soon."

"We shouldn't've had to leave again."

"Well, that's not something we can help." Suddenly he stood, then held out his hand to me. "Come on. I want to take you somewhere."

I made a face. "Will, it's supposed to snow again soon. And I'm tired, and it's cold, and I really just want - "

He leaned in to give me a quick kiss. "Trust me, you're going to like it. Get your coat."

I gave him another dubious glance but eventually complied. We took a few minutes to change into our civvies, and once we were all bundled up in jeans, boots, down jackets, and beanies, we left the house.

"So where is it that we're going exactly?" I asked as I followed him out the door.

"Sorry, Coop. Can't answer that. It's a surprise."

Though I could hear the excitement in his tone, when he turned around to face me, he suddenly had a serious look on his face. He opened his mouth to speak, hesitated, and then decided to go for it.

"Look. I know things were rough during the war, what with being separated all the time, and losing the baby." He swallowed. "But it hasn't all been bad. We made it through. We had the twins at the end. We got four years of uninterrupted time together and with the kids since it all ended." He paused to wrap his arms around me. I slowly hugged him back and rested my head against his chest, and he continued in a lower tone, "So I know you're worried about this mission, and I know why, after everything we went through the last time. But we'll be okay, Cooper. I'm going with you, and I'll always have your back."

Despite the sharp twinge of pain I felt at the mention of the miscarriage, the rest of his words made me smile. "What would I do without my big, strong man?"

Willis smirked. "Probably still kick ass and take names."

"Not without you."

I had him pinned against the low fence surrounding the front yard now, and I leaned into him and gave him a deep kiss. Willis responded instantly, cupping a hand around my cheek to pull me in even more as he kissed me back.

"I have a feeling we're not going to make it where we need to goâ€|" Willis murmured against my lips.

I kissed him again and pulled back just enough to flash him a mischievous grin. "Don't act like you're so disappointed."

Willis chuckled. His lips were on my own once more when we suddenly heard the front door open. Light flooded the entryway, and a slim, shadowed figure stood in the doorway as we turned back to look.

"Seriously! Do I have to yell at you two to stop making out everywhere like I used to in high school?"

Willis responded first. "We weren't â€"

"Will, I don't want to see my friend getting mauled by my brother! Is that so hard to understand? You're in front of the house, I can still see you. You're lucky Mom and Dad went to sleep."

My husband rolled his eyes. "Way to ruin the moment, sis."

"Try to keep your moments private."

Jamie shut the door then, and Willis and I were left standing there in momentary shock. Then we started laughing.

"She never got over the fact that her best friend married her brother, did she?" I asked.

"Nope," Willis replied as we started off once more. "I think that's thrown her for a loop more than anything else in her life."

\* \* \*

><p>We walked the dark, snow-covered streets hand in hand as we made our way towards...wherever it was Willis was taking us. I tried to judge where we were, but it'd been many years since we'd visited last, and the weak light from the streetlamps made it hard to check out our surroundings - although they did illuminate the fallen snow in bright, glinting patterns. It was nice to see, and really made it feel like winter and the approaching holidays. There'd been nothing like that back in Florida, on Earth. Another reason it was good to be home.<p>

It was several minutes before I was finally able to orient myself, and began to guess at where Willis was headed. After a couple more blocks, I grew sure of it.

"Will, are we going - "

"Shh. We're almost there." He turned to smile at me. "Then you can say 'I knew it!'"

I punched him playfully in the gut. "Ass. I don't sound like that."

"Ow! Okay, fine. But look - here we are."

Just a few meters ahead of us was the welcome sign for Jameson High School, the school Willis and I had graduated from as teenagers. It'd also been the place where we'd first met.

A corner of my lips turned up as I wondered what my husband's true purpose was in bringing us here. I slowly pulled away from him and gave him a look. "Will..."

He grinned. "Keep going. We're not inside yet."

"It's fenced off, honey."

"So?" His grin widened. "Don't tell me you can't climb a simple obstacle anymore."

I finally smirked back. "Please. I climb fences that are much taller than this in training every day."

Catching him off guard, I suddenly took off and started sprinting for the fence. I jumped up onto the chain links once I got to it and gripped the top with my bare hands, gritting my teeth at the cold when I did. The bar was freezing, but I ignored it and pulled myself up to the top, then swung my legs over and hopped down on the other side.

"Come on, Will! Your turn!"

"Okay, here goes!"

Though I was fairly tall, I wasn't as tall as Willis, so he didn't

need to give himself a running start. My husband just came up to the fence, grabbed the upper-most links he could reach, and pulled himself up bodily to the top before jumping down on the other side like I did. When he was done, he stood in front of me and rubbed his hands together, grinning.

"Damn. We should've brought gloves. We're lucky we didn't stick to that thing."

"So? Where to now?"

"Well, we can walk to some old classrooms, and then we'll head to the parking lot." He suddenly seemed oddly nervous as he scratched the side of his face. "I'm not sure if you remember its significance as well as I do, but...I'd like to go there with you."

"Of course I remember, Will. I'd love to go."

\* \* \*

><p>We spent a half-hour walking around the school, peeking into old classrooms of ours and trying to see if they'd changed in any way or not. They most likely had on the inside, but outside, it really didn't look all that different from when Willis and I had been students here some twelve years ago. When we were done checking out all that we could, we found ourselves near the parking lot he'd mentioned.</p>

"You know, I wanted to take us back here for our tenth wedding anniversary this year," Willis said. "Commemorate the place that started things off for us."

"Yeah? What changed your mind?"

He shrugged. "The kids, our training schedules. I was bummed when I realized it wasn't going to pan out, but I kept it in the back of my mind for the future." He glanced over at me. "Since our tenth has come and gone, I was thinking maybe we could celebrate our twentieth here."

I smiled at the thought. "Twenty years with anyone else, and I'd probably be at the point of pulling my hair out. It's never felt that way with you. I still can't believe we've already been married for ten." I stopped to look him in the eyes. "It's been a good ten, Will. I love you."

He smiled back as he pulled me closer. "I love you, too, Natalie."

Snow began to fall as we shared a passionate kiss in the very place we'd first met thirteen years earlier. At seventeen we'd been nervous, self-conscious teens feeling the effects of a first love intensely, with every part of ourselves. Funny how in the many years that had passed since, the feeling hadn't dampened by much. We were older, more world-wise and much more confident in ourselves and our abilities, but after all that, Willis was still the only person who made me feel like this.

We didn't pull apart for another few minutes. When we did, Willis had one of the biggest grins I'd ever seen on his face. It was

contagious, and I was matching it.

"What?" I asked as he continued to smile.

"I was just thinking how nervous I was to talk to you that day in the rain." He chuckled. "I must've wondered to myself a million times what I thought I was doing. And when Ethan showed up..." He shook his head. "But even that didn't deter me. I knew I still wanted to see you again, get to know you, spend time with you."

I pulled him towards me before he could say more and kissed him again. "I'm glad you did."

## 11. Chapter 10: Eve of Battle

\*\*Chapter Ten: Eve of Battle\*\*

\*\*Undetermined Shipboard Time, December 14, 2557. \*\*Onboard UNSC Transport Ship Suave Affair, En Route to Planet Khan\*\*. "The Last Hurrah," Outer Colonies. Prologue to the New Age of Warfare\*\*

Leaving the kids on Mars was a hard thing to do, just like Willis and I had known it was going to be - and the reality hadn't been much better. I'd been closer to tears than from anything else since the war had ended, but I kept a brave face for Gabriel, Liam, and Olivia as Willis and I had hugged them all good-bye. Soon after that, it was back on a ship headed for Earth, two more weeks of intense training in Florida, and then we were both aboard an even larger ship - a warship this time - en route to the Outer Colonies. It'd been a lot more shipboard activity than I was used to anymore, or that I liked, but at least I had Willis with me to keep things on an even keel.

Now, almost three weeks into our journey, I passed through the ship's narrow corridors towards my quarters, needing to change and get ready for the day's PT. Shipboard time was artificial and thus didn't always coincide with training schedules on the ground, but since we'd been traveling for so long, I'd gotten used to it anyway. My watch said it was sometime past 1300 in the afternoon, even though I'd just gotten off the morning duty shift.

Being in a rush, I started tugging off my uniform jacket as I walked briskly through a number of hatches, hurriedly returning salutes as I went. I was in my T-shirt with my dogtags hanging out by the time I reached the senior officers berthing area. Their rhythmic clinking against my shirt was driving me insane, but that could've just been my mood. In four more days, we'd be on Khan - and I still had absolutely no idea what to expect.

"Please state your name and rank for entry," the ship's AI said when I tried to gain access.

I huffed an irritated sigh and replied, "Major Cooper, Natalie McKenzie. Service number 38221-50486-NC."

The light went green on the hatch handle. "Access granted."

Pulling open the door, I stepped through and continued walking past

two other rooms, jacket balled up in one hand, until I got to my own. Once inside, I tugged the hatch shut and turned to see Willis getting into PT gear of his own.

He glanced up when he heard the door close. "Hey, Coop."

"Hey. I thought you had the next watch," I said, moving over to the small closet to pull out my other T-shirt and shorts - the ones with my name and a major's gold oak leaf insignia stenciled on the front. The uniform jacket I left draped on the small chair next to the equally minuscule desk. Shipboard accommodations...and to think the quarters I shared with Willis were miles away from what the enlisted men and women got.

Unperturbed, Willis tugged his shirt off over his head and exchanged it for his PT one. "Nope. I managed to switch shifts with one of the other pilots in my air wing so we'd get the same schedule today." He grinned at me. "We've had back-to-back on-off shifts all this week. I wanted at least one day where one of us wasn't leaving just as the other got back."

I smiled slightly as I pulled off my deck boots and uniform pants, then quickly yanked on my shorts. "Yeah, that's been a real pain in the ass. You ready for the run today?"

"How long are you planning to make it?"

"Five miles, so you can keep up."

He snorted. "I can keep up just fine. Pilots don't slack off just because they're not in the field, you know."

I finished putting on my running shoes and then walked right up to his face, smirking. "Prove it, flyboy."

My husband smirked back. "Oh, I will. Just you watch."

\* \* \*

><p>We got to the gym area inside the ship several minutes later. Ship designs had improved immeasurably in recent years thanks to new discoveries, and that included interior modifications as well. The UNSCS <em>Suave Affair</em> boasted a mile-long circuited indoor track and a spacious PT area to keep its large contingent of Marines and sailors fit for their next post. There were few others working out at this hour, but some of those who'd had the same shift as us were also exercising.

I stopped in front of the track with Willis and stretched before going through a set of push-ups, pull-ups on the pull-up bar, and sit-ups. Once that was done, we took a five minute break and got started again.

Sweat dripping from my eyebrows, I glanced over at Willis and said, "Ready?"

He nodded, a dark stain of sweat already appearing near the collar of his T-shirt. "Let's go."

I started off the run at a jogging pace for the first lap to warm up,

then pushed harder afterward. Willis chugged along right beside me, lengthening his strides when necessary. It wasn't as long of a run as either of us were used to. Still, after having just gotten off a duty shift, it was enough for both of us for today.

By the end of it I was pouring sweat, though I still managed to sprint the last few meters to the finish, as I'd been taught when I ran track back in high school and at the Naval Academy. Willis was just a few strides behind, and he came to an abrupt halt in front of me just as I laced my fingers behind my head, breathing hard. I watched with growing amusement while he bent over and gripped the hem of his shorts, trying to take in oxygen as sweat fell from his forehead onto the track. I waited to get air back into my own lungs before teasing him.

"Too fast for you?" I asked with a grin.

"No," my husband wheezed back.

I laughed. "Seems to me like you've gotten a little lazy the past few years, Captain," I said, indicating the captain's bars stenciled on his shirt.

"Lazy?" Willis scoffed. "I'm just getting started, Cooper." He quickly wiped up the sweat on his face with his T-shirt, lifting up the bottom of it to reach his face. Then, smirking as he moved closer, his voice went low as he whispered in my ear, "I can go for more. I was just hoping we could do the rest of our PT in private, \_Major\_."

I slapped him playfully on his chest. "Okay, you called my bluff. I need a break. I'm going to go take a quick shower and I'll meet you at the practice range."

\* \* \*

><p>The first weapon I chose to fire at the range was a magnum; I'd been in enough hairy situations in my career that I knew how quickly things could go FUBAR, and thus, how quickly your sidearm became the only thing standing in the way of you and certain death in a tough fight. Rifles were powerful and fast, but that also meant they ran out of ammo rapidly. Your pistol was always your last line of defense, so it was to your benefit to be more than good at shooting it.</p>

Taking aim at the paper targets in front of me in the small range, I'd already fired off two rounds when Willis took his place beside me, a submachine gun in his hands. I caught a whiff of his freshly showered scent and smelled the soap on him. He unloaded the entire clip before turning to me.

"So, Coop? You feel any more ready for this mission now?"

Picturing a Covie in my crosshairs, I fired off half a dozen rounds at the target, aiming first at the head, then the neck and chest. "No. You?"

He shrugged. "I'm not going to see action yet. You know my air wing's staying here on the ship while you go planetside. We'll only come down to provide air support and evac if things get way out of hand."

Pausing for a moment, he shot me a quick glance. "I know you'll be in the thick of it if things go sideways, though. Stay safe."

I smiled faintly. "I will. I've been in this business a long time, remember? I'm not worried about myself so much as what we're going to have to deal with down there." My smile waned as I lowered my gun. "I really hope it turns out to be exactly as advertised, but there's just been too much going on in this sector lately to be that trusting."

Switching out my magnum for an MA5D this time - an upgraded version of both the MA5B and MA5C I'd used a lot during the war - I decided to go for the assault rifle for old time's sake. It wouldn't hurt to fire off a few rounds. I loaded the weapon and took aim, then squeezed off four tight bursts at the targets, taking them out quickly one by one as they popped up. God, I'd forgotten how much I loved this gun.

Willis flashed me a lopsided grin when he saw the expression on my face. "You look like a kid in a candy store, Cooper."

"I guess I've just gotten a little tired of being forced to the back of the pack with a mid-ranged weapon. I love the DMR, too, but I just...you know. I enjoy using the weapons that saved my ass in combat all the time, back in the day."

He laughed. "'Back in the day'? Are we that old now?"

"No. But we're not first lieutenants anymore, either, Will." I sighed. "We're war vets, senior officers. Like it or not, I'll have a price on my head now in the field, on top of everything else."

At that, Willis finally lowered his weapon, too. He turned to set it back down in its rack, then came up behind me and said, "You're stressing too much, Natalie. I think you need a break from training for a while."

Ejecting the clip from my own gun, I faced him with a raised eyebrow and a creeping grin. "What do you have in mind?"

A grin appeared on his face as well. "Come on."

My husband led us back to our quarters, where it didn't take us long to find our way to the bed. I smirked as I gripped the jacket of Willis's fatigues hard and pulled him closer, kissing him slowly at first, then picking up the pace when he took my face in his hands and deepened the embrace. We both pulled off our jackets and boots fast, and our shirts followed shortly after.

By now my bra was gone and I had my legs wrapped around Willis's waist as we continued kissing fervently, breathing heavy now. I slid my hands down his back before moving them around the front to his fly, enjoying the sensation of his bare skin against mine. It'd been a long, busy week as the time to disembark crept closer and closer, and now I finally had something to distract myself from the myriad concerns that swirled around ceaselessly in my mind.

Willis grinned again and kissed me hard when I rolled him over onto his back. I matched his expression and gave him a deep kiss in return. For now, at least, my mind went blank as I gave in completely

and solely to the feeling.

## 12. Chapter 11: Not a Moment Too Soon

\*\*Chapter Eleven: Not a Moment Too Soon\*\*

"Hey. You're not falling asleep there, are you?"

Snuggled against Willis's bare chest under the covers, head resting against his shoulder with an arm wrapped around his middle, I almost was. I was comfortable, warm, satisfied, and fatigued - the perfect recipe for a restful sleep. Still, though I didn't open my eyes, I responded to my husband's amused question.

"Kind of," I said. I let out a contented sigh and murmured, "I'm really going to miss this."

I felt Willis's chest move beneath me as he chuckled. "Me, or this?"

"This." Moving my head up, I opened one eye and flashed a wicked grin at him. Willis shook his head, then grinned back and kissed me.

"Should've known you were only after the physical with me," he teased. "My mom warned me about girls like you, but I couldn't resist."

I laughed, then hugged him harder as I kissed him back. "Of course I'm going to miss you, Will. Part of me wishes you were coming planetside with us, but I know you'll be safer here, so I'm grateful for that."

My husband raised an eyebrow at me. "I'm not as fragile as I look, you know."

"That's not what I meant, I just - "

He squeezed the arm around my shoulders. "I know, honey. It's okay."

I swallowed. "You know what I went through in the last months of the war, in Ecuador...thinking you and Gabriel were gone - "

"Natalie, I know. I said it's okay. I was just teasing." He kissed the top of my head. "You don't need to think like that, Coop. I think you're building this mission up in your head more than anything else. You'll see when you get down there what it's going to be, and I bet it won't be half as bad as what you've dreamed up. Until then, there's no point going around in circles, right?"

Finally, I sighed. "Right."

Willis leaned back against his pillow and put the arm that wasn't around me behind his head. "Are you hungry?"

"A little. I haven't eaten since this morning, but then again I haven't had much of an appetite these days." Too stressed out, and too busy.

"Well, I'm starving." He leaned over to kiss me again. "Want to come with me to the mess?"

"Sure."

\* \* \*

><p>After getting clean and dressed again, I found myself sitting alone in the chow hall, sipping on a bottle of water and picking at my food as I waited for my husband to arrive. With my thoughts bouncing around between the mission, the health of my Marines, and the well-being of my three kids back on Mars, I wasn't paying too much attention to my surroundings when a figure suddenly took a seat across from me at the table.</p>

"Long time no see. How're you holding up there, Major?"

It was Hayden. I hadn't seen my best friend for several days because of the constantly changing duty shifts and all the prep work we'd had to do with our own battalions lately. I grinned at him.

"Hey, Oliver. Pretty good."

He chuckled. "Guess you can't complain when you're one of only a handful of Marines who gets to bunk with their spouse, huh?"

The grin didn't leave my face. Instead it got wider. "Nope."

I didn't elaborate. Willis arrived a few seconds later and sat down beside me, immediately digging into his meal.

"Damn," he said. "I'm famished." Then he glanced up, swallowing his food quickly. "Oh, Major Hayden. Sir."

"Willis." Being ever the bright one, Hayden looked from me to my husband and a corner of his lips curled slightly upward. "I was just - "

Suddenly the deck beneath us shuddered, stopping whatever my friend was going to say in mid-sentence. Our trays didn't fall off the table, although they came dangerously close to landing in our laps, along with our drinks. For a moment, all three of us were too stunned to even react.

Finally, Willis said, "What the hell?" He was halfway up from the table when the deck shook a second time. He fell back hard onto the ground as Hayden and I rocked in our seats. I looked down at him the moment the quaking stopped, concerned.

"Honey?"

"I'm fine," Willis replied, pushing himself back up to his feet. "I don't know what the fuck that was, but I should get to the hangar bay. I've got a feeling we might be suiting up for this."

"Be careful, Will."

"Always am."

While my husband dashed out of sight, I turned to find dozens of pairs of eyes on me and Hayden, even though neither of us knew what was happening, either. Since no message had come yet from the bridge, however, I knew it was up to the two of us to get things organized below decks, just in case.

"Marines, don't just sit there and gawk!" I shouted. "Head for the armory! Grab a weapon and gear up! You'll receive further orders as you go!"

My best friend stood as well. "This half of the mess goes with me!" he yelled, indicating the right side. "The other half goes with Major Cooper! Move it!"

The chow hall was a flurry of activity all of a sudden, with tens of Marines scrambling from their meals to the outside. I lead my group down to the port side weapons lockers, while Hayden went off to the starboard side with his group. I recognized several of my own men among those with me, though my unit and Hayden's had mixed now, and over half our Marines were berthed on other decks. It didn't really matter; what mattered at the moment was stopping whatever was attacking us.

Once we reached the armory, I motioned the rest of the Marines inside a squad at a time, then grabbed the nearest NCO I could find by the shoulder.

"What's your name, Sergeant?"

"Uh, Walter, ma'am," the noncom replied. She looked young, but must've seen action before given her rank. I hoped.

"Get these Marines in and out on the double, Marine," I ordered. "I don't want them crowding the place because then we won't get anything done. Just keep a steady stream going, and no loitering. We don't know what's going on yet, so we've got to be prepared for anything."

"Yes, ma'am!" She turned to the rest of the men and women rushing to pick up guns and ammo. "Marines! I want one line on the port side, one on the starboard! You go in one and out the other! Grab your weapons and mags and move the hell out!"

Now that that was established, I moved over to the bulkhead and slammed the side of my fist into the ship's intercom, hoping to get the message out below decks. No doubt they'd felt the ship lurch, and whatever officers were down there had the situation under control, but I wanted to provide everyone with a clear set of instructions if I could. My frustration rose when I saw the light on the intercom flash red - it wasn't working.

"\_Shit\_," I muttered. At least now I knew why we had no word from the bridge. This was bad news.

A Marine behind me tapped my shoulder just as I was about to turn around. "Major? First Lieutenant Samuel Enson, ma'am. I'm in Major Hayden's unit. If you need some help rallying the troops, I've got it."

I gave him a once over to size him up, noting he was already squared

away in his gear with an SMG in his hands. He was obviously a put-together kid. "All right, Lieutenant. Get the Marines who are geared up and armed organized down the hall. I'll come issue orders as soon as I get myself equipped."

"Yes, ma'am."

Ignoring Sergeant Walter's line, I pushed through into the armory and grabbed the nearest body armor, strapping it quickly on my torso as I moved to locate a weapon. Since we were on the ship I didn't have my sidearm on me, which I regretted - it wasn't going to do me any good sitting unloaded on the table in my quarters. Same went for my two combat knives. I'd have to make do with whatever I picked up here.

Thankfully I was able to find the gun of my choice as I scanned the racks - an MA5D, the rifle I'd just practiced with at the range earlier in the afternoon. Though I'd been firing it just for old time's sake, it turned out to be a boon for what was going on now. I paused in the doorway to pick up five clips of ammo, gripped a helmet on the armor racks up above, and stepped back out.

I was making my way over to the geared up group when the ship gave another hideous heave, throwing me hard into the bulkhead. Groaning when I hit, I heard a metallic thunk when the side of my chest plate connected with the wall. I braced myself with my hands and was able to stop myself from falling down, although many of the Marines still in line and in the armory weren't as lucky.

"Get up and get moving, Marines!" I cried once I'd straightened up.  
"We don't have all day, now go!"

The line started going much more quickly after that. It was pretty clear by now that these weren't just isolated hiccups - something out there was hammering us.

Another reason I hated being on ships: I didn't like getting assaulted by an enemy I couldn't see or fight back with my own hands. Here, we were all just plain vulnerable, completely at the mercy of physics and the structural integrity of the ship.

A few seconds later I made it down the corridor, where the Marines who were ready stood awaiting orders. I rapidly went through the ranks and sectioned them off into squads, then pushed forward the first three. "Lieutenant Enson?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Take these Marines and head for the port side life boats. If we're going to get boarded, that's a good place to set up defenses. Make sure you've got at least two SAWs on hand, and maybe a thirty cal as well if you can get it."

He nodded. "Understood, Major."

"The rest of you, on me. We'll grab whoever's left in the armory and that will be our fourth squad. We're heading for the hangar bay."

\* \* \*

><p>With friendly ships flying in and out, the hangar bay was another hot zone for possible enemy boarding action. As easy as it was for our ships to launch out, enemy ships could slip in - if they managed to outmaneuver the defense cannons outside. I knew from my studies of naval battles at the Academy that it was tough, but definitely not impossible.</p>

I craned my neck out of reflex to search for Willis, but I didn't see him at first glance, and I didn't have time to look more thoroughly than that. He was either here or in the starboard side bay or already in space; he was a seasoned pilot and Marine, so I knew he could hack it either way. I still worried about him, but I pushed it to the back of my mind now as I focused my full attention on getting the Marines with me set up.

"First squad, bring your SAW gunner forward and cover those decks! Second squad, set up behind the crates! Third, I want you up top with any mid-range weapons you've got and provide cover fire for the Marines below! Fourth, you're with first up front, any SAWs go to you!"

Pulling on my helmet then, I waited for just an instant for it to sync up with my assault rifle as I racked the weapon. The ammo counter popped up on my HUD, indicating a full load of thirty-two rounds. It'd have to last since it was my only gun.

The thought made me frown. If we did get boarded, I didn't want ammunition to be an issue when we were sitting on such a stockpile inside the ship. I jogged up to the closest Marine and tapped him. He turned around and glanced up from his crouch, looking bewildered that he was being addressed.

"Ma'am?"

My HUD supplied his name as Lance Corporal Drako. I motioned for him to stand and said, "Marine, get yourself and a teammate back to the armory. I want both of you to bring up a crate of ammo each. Hoof it, Lance Corporal."

"Yes, ma'am!"

I opened a COM channel then to all the Marines, broadcasting on the general channel. "This is Major Cooper. Comms are down across the deck and we currently have no contact with the bridge, so we're preparing for boarding action. Officers and NCOs, make sure your Marines are wearing helmets - those are the only method of communication we've got right now. Focus your efforts on the hangar bays and lifeboat areas of the ship, and if you're on a separate deck, keep me apprised of any changes, understood?"

Acknowledgment lights winked green on my HUD. I cut the connection and opened up another channel, this time a private one to Major Hayden. "Oliver?"

"I can hear you, Cooper. What's going on?"

"Nothing yet here. How's your side looking?"

"Clear as day, but that doesn't mean it won't change. Still don't know shit about what's happening; couldn't get an open channel to the

bridge."

"Same here. We'll just have to sit tight for now and see."

He sighed on the other end. "I sent up a fireteam directly to the top to find out the situation, but it might be a while before we hear back. The elevators are down, too, so they're going to have to climb a shitload of stairs."

"Damn." I gripped my rifle tighter. "Okay. I guess that's better than never knowing. You'll tell me if shit comes your way?"

My best friend chuckled. "'Course I will, Cooper. Always ready to spread the joy and cheer this time of year."

I snorted. "I would say keep it to yourself, but in this case it's definitely better not to be in the dark. I'll do the same if it hits the fan here first. Cooper out."

Come on, I thought to myself, growing impatient as I half-stood behind a tall stack of metal containers close to the other Marines.  
If you're going to board and try to shred us to pieces, just fucking do it already.

### 13. Chapter 12: Launch Into Dark

\*\*Chapter Twelve: Launch Into Dark\*\*

As he all but sprinted out of the mess hall, Captain William "Willis" Hawk ran head-on into a dazed sailor in the hallway, yet another crew member who was also apparently wondering what the hell was happening to the ship. The enlisted man staggered back from the force of the hit but didn't fall, instead turning to yell an obscenity at Hawk's back while he continued to run for the hangar bay.

"Sorry!" Willis shouted back, although he didn't stop. If something really was attacking the Suave Affair - and all signs pointed to it - then he knew it'd be the pilots who were sent out first to repel any incoming fighters...or potential boarders.

And if I let any through, it's going to be Natalie who's got to deal with them. The sudden thought spurred him to run faster.

Since he'd been closer to that exit of the chow hall, Willis made for the starboard side hangar bay. Once there, he was half-relieved, half-anxious to see that other members of his air wing were busy gearing up as well. All along the length of the enormous bay, Broadswords were getting prepped for flight, and pilots tugging on helmets and flight suits for take off. Willis ran to a nearby locker and started pulling a suit on himself.

"Hey, man! Nice of you to join the party! What took you so long?"

Hawk turned to see his best friend, now made a captain like himself, suiting up beside him. He couldn't help but grin a little. "Better not give me any shit now, Brandon. Looks like we've got bigger fish to fry outside. And if you must know, I was busy getting a bite to eat when the ship threw me on my ass in front of my wife."

Brandon chuckled. "Damn. I'd've paid money to see that. Where's Cooper now?"

Willis zipped up his flight suit and gripped his helmet and a pair of gloves. "I don't know. Still in the mess, maybe, probably gathering up the Marines."

"You're worried about her. I can tell."

"I love her. I'll always worry, but it comes with the territory, and I know she can handle herself." He finished pulling on his helmet, then tugged on his gloves. Patting his friend and wingmate once on the back, he said, "Good luck out there, bro."

"You, too, man."

The captain ran for the nearest F-41 and immediately started going through the pre-flight checklist. There'd still been no word from the bridge, something he found exceedingly odd, but he knew that if there were any orders to the contrary of launching out, the CO of their air wing would inform them.

Over the last year or so, Willis had gotten a lot more accustomed to flying these ships as opposed to Longswords and Pelicans. He found he liked them much more, if only because he was the sole pilot inside. After having lost two of his co-pilots during the war - one in Lienz when he crashed, the other in St. Louis in a ground skirmish - he was turned off to having any sort of partner in flight. They tended not to have a very happy ending, and Hawk had always felt more comfortable being responsible only for himself in combat. In that way, he contrasted sharply with his wife, who'd always seemed to take on larger and larger burdens of command almost naturally. The role fit her, and it was one of the things he loved about her.

\_Be safe, Coop. I'll do my best to keep the skies clear for you.\_

In less than a minute he was ready for launch. Frustration got the better of him though as he waited for a half dozen others to leave the hangar first. Then, it was finally his turn. He took in a deep breath and pressed his fingers against his family's picture, something that had become a ritual for him now before take off.

\_Gabe, Liam, Olivia, don't let Daddy down,\_ he thought to himself.\_ Here goes nothing.\_

He pushed the thrusters on the starfighter, and it hummed to life as it accelerated forward. In seconds, he was out in the blackness of space around the ship. Hitting the COM, he announced, "Kilo, this is Gold Leader. Until we hear from the big cheese, you're sticking with me. I know things are scattered and chaotic right now and we're not up at full strength yet, but form up tight and let's go see who's knocking on our door."

Acknowledgment lights lit up on his cockpit display. He shifted his eyes to the tactical board as well, hoping to see the enemy ships - or whatever the hell was attacking them - show up on the screen, but so far it came back blank.

He frowned. That wasn't right. There had to be some -

"Whoa!"

Hawk jerked the controls hard to port as a lance of plasma streaked past his Broadsword. It'd come this close to blasting the small craft in half. But now we know who our enemy is, he thought, his heart still beating hard from the close call. So much for the truce.

"Talon! Those ships are launching plasma! It's the fuckin' Elites!" Willis heard his friend's cry over the COM.

"I saw, Snoopy. Doesn't matter, though - we beat back enough of the alien bastards during the war." He smirked. "Let's give them the full reunion tour, shall we?"

"Roger that!" came Captain Heat's excited reply. "I've got your six whenever you're ready."

"All right. Stick close. Things are about to get crazy."

Willis wasn't kidding. When they finally rounded their crafts down and over the underbelly of the Suave Affair, they emerged on the other side with a complete view of what they'd be facing - they'd stumbled on a formerly Covenant ship, thankfully smaller than their own, yet still formidable.

"Holy shit. I hope the swabbies up on the big boat are ready to fight that."

Captain Hawk's heart lurched, knowing Natalie was still onboard. "Yeah, Snoopy. Me, too." Hard as it was, he forced his thoughts away from his wife's well-being to the battle at hand. "But that's the Navy's problem now, nothing we can do there. We've got to take out whatever comes out of their bays."

"Gold Leader, Eyeshadow! Multiple bogies inbound! They're Seraphs!" his XO, Jessica Meyers, yelled over the channel.

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Hawk said to himself aloud. Then he replied, "Roger that, Eyeshadow. Kilo, you heard the lady! You're free to engage! Select targets and let's blast them back to their own turf!"

The captain didn't sit back and watch the spectacle of tens of F-41s rushing forward into the fight. He maneuvered his own craft ahead of the others, picked up the trail of one of the incoming Seraphs - already getting into some fancy flying itself - and broke formation for the attack. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed on his tactical display that his wingmate broke with him.

"Snoopy, I'm gonna take this bird for a spin, put her through all the paces," he said with a creeping grin. "Show us your best, baby."

Heat laughed. "Coming in with you, Talon. Don't hurt yourself. I don't think Natalie would forgive you this time."

Hawk ignored the light jab and dove as another incoming Seraph

launched more hot lances of plasma at the Broadsword, then pulled up hard once the shot had passed, continuing his pursuit of the chosen target. This guy - alien - was good. But Willis was better. As soon as he had the bastard lined up in his sights after following him through a series of elaborate dips and swirls, he pressed the button for missile launch and let him have it.

Twin missiles burst forth from beneath the craft, making it shudder for a moment as they were released. Willis kept an intense focus on his viewscreens while the explosives shot through the star-dotted darkness of space, honing in on their target and mirroring its motions perfectly.

\_That's right, you son of a bitch,\_ Hawk thought. \_You're mine now.\_

Willis pulled the trigger on his F-41's autocannons, spraying the Seraph with fire as it attempted a sudden sharp, steep climb. Adjusting quickly, Captain Hawk followed, feeling the gees pushing him back hard against the seat while his Broadsword accelerated hard.

Yet he found he was loving every minute of it, despite the high-risk factor. As bad as the war had been, he could only now admit to himself that he sometimes still missed the thrill of it. He hadn't been in a dogfight - a real one - since Voi. It was exhilarating, even in its extreme danger. Or perhaps because of it.

The rounds from the autocannon hit dead-on this time, making the Seraph's shields flare and finally dissolve with a silent burst of a shimmer. It'd managed to outrun the missiles the first time; Hawk was determined to make it pay now. He pressed his thumb down hard on the button again, hoping they hit home.

The captain let out an involuntary whoop when he was rewarded with a bright, bluish explosion right before his eyes. He had to jerk the craft hard to starboard to avoid the debris, but it'd been well worth it.

"Hell yeah! You see that, Snoopy?"

"Did I ever! Nice going, Talon!"

"And on to the next one. We've got plenty more to go."

"I get to choose this time. You got my back, bro?"

"Always."

Willis was happily following Heat in on the next run when one of their own suddenly came spiraling clear into their line of pursuit, trailing smoke. Hawk had to maneuver quickly to the side yet again to keep from getting hit, as did his friend in front of him. A moment later another Seraph came screaming in, firing its plasma cannons at a frenetic pace, promptly transforming the wounded Broadsword into a bright flash of space dust.

"Shit! Who was that?" Captain Heat cried over the COM.

"Eyeshadow," Willis responded quietly. His throat was suddenly dry.

He'd been flying with her for years, and she'd been a damn good XO and pilot. His heart dropped at the loss. "Fuck, Snoopy. That was her."

The other end was silent for a while before Brandon finally replied, "It's okay, Talon. We'll take this next one out for her. And the next."

By now, even more Seraphs were being launched from their ship and joining the growing maelstrom in space. But there were also more Broadswords out now, too - pilots who'd just made it to their crafts, or those who'd been asleep off-duty. It was a vicious fight to be thrust into, and Hawk was glad he'd arrived on scene at the start instead of having to get acquainted with it now, when it was in full swing. Plasma streaks pierced the dark vacuum all around them, human missiles relentlessly pursued their targets, autocannons went into overdrive from heavy use, and crafts on both sides exploded in brief but brilliant displays of light like fireworks.

Through it all Willis and his wingmate ducked and banked away from enemy fighters and debris, trying instead to outmaneuver them on their own terms, picking off any damaged ex-Covenant crafts as they went. After a while it started to become tedious rather than fun, and Hawk's thirst for the fight began to wane.

"Ever feel like it doesn't matter what we do? More keep popping up the moment we take one out!" Heat said.

"Yeah, I know, but we've got to - " Hawk's eyes went wide as he blew past the last vestiges of yet another Seraph he'd taken out. "Oh, God. Snoopy, look. They're slipping past us! They're heading for our hangar bays!"

Brandon's response was instant and just as agitated. "They're trying to board?"

"Dammit! I should've seen that coming, but I thought we were keeping them under control." Without another thought, Willis opened a general channel to all the pilots currently in flight. "This is Captain William Hawk commanding Kilo Squadron, callsign 'Talon'. Be advised, we've got multiple enemy starcraft making their way towards the Suave Affair's hangar bays. We've got to take them out!"

"Talon, First Lieutenant Connor Adrian, Valkyrie Squadron," a pilot Hawk didn't recognize answered. "Sir, we just launched. It's not just Seraphs in the skies, and it's not just the hangar bays they're attacking. It looks like the Seraphs are escorting in Phantoms, too, sir. They're punching through our viewports on all decks. If I didn't know any better, I'd say they're trying to take the ship."

Willis's blood ran cold. Shit. Natalie's going to have a huge mess on her hands. He swallowed down the sudden lump in his throat, the fear for his wife's life that constricted his airway, and said, "All the more reason to go after them, Lieutenant. We need to defend the ship, now. Tighten up the formation; we'll tackle the rest out here while you keep those hangar bays and viewports alien-free."

"Yes, sir!"

"Talon out."

Captain Hawk took in a second deep breath then as he maneuvered to set his sights on another target in space. \_Cooper,\_ he thought, \_I sure hope you're ready for this.\_

#### 14. Chapter 13: Drawing First Blood

##### \*\*Chapter Thirteen: Drawing First Blood\*\*

It was strange maybe, but in the six years I'd spent fighting the Covenant during the war, I'd never been aboard a ship that'd been attacked like this before. Passage wasn't safe and definitely not guaranteed as we'd fought for survival against an alien enemy that was superior to us in almost every way, especially in space, yet still, I'd seen all of my previous combat exclusively on the ground. Though I'd trained for such contingencies before, this was going to be as new to me as to the Marines who'd just joined up.

As their leader, though, I couldn't let that show. I had enough campaigns under my belt that not much surprised me anymore, and despite this being an entirely new ballgame for me, I had years of experience to draw upon to compensate for that they didn't.

Still, I found it kind of funny - in a not-so-humorous way - that my first time was going to come \_after\_ the war had supposedly ended.

"Hold steady, Marines," I said firmly through the COM, knowing that everyone else was probably getting just as antsy as me. As usual, waiting was the hardest part - it always felt like it was going to be better to just get it over with, until you were actually in the thick of it and bad shit started to go down.

My private channel with Hayden crackled then as I stared at the now-empty hangar bay, trying to catch a glimpse of whatever was going on outside through our limited view.

"Cooper? Anything yet?"

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, leaning out from behind cover to see. "Not a damn thing, Hayden. And I don't see anything going on out there, either. Think maybe we overreacted a bit?"

His response was immediate and unwavering. "No. There's definitely something there."

I let out a frustrated sigh. I trusted my best friend's judgment completely - he was five years older than me, and he'd been both a major and battalion commander a lot longer than I had. He'd even been deployed out here very recently to boot, while I'd spent the last four years living in relative comfort back on Earth. If he said something was there, then there was, without a doubt. It just hadn't shown itself to us yet.

"Shit," I said. "I kind of just wish - "

The words weren't even out of my mouth when a bright lance of blue

light shot through space right in front of the hangar bay. Then, seconds later, all of us watched as a squadron of Broadswords suddenly appeared from beneath the ship, in hot pursuit of the dozens of alien crafts that now dotted our view outside.

My heart caught in my throat for a moment as I wondered if one of those pilots was Willis. I hoped he wouldn't try anything too risky. I swear to God, Will, if you get hurt....

"Ma'am! Is that...the Covenant?" one of the Marines broadcast on the channel then.

Yeah, "truce" my ass, \_I thought. To the Marine, I replied quickly, "Those are Seraphs, Lieutenant. It's got to be the Elites. Don't know who else might be involved yet."

Though I hated them and the rest of the ex-Covies with a passion, I also found myself a little relieved. With all the crap going on in the Outer Colonies lately, it was hard to know which of the UNSC's multiple adversaries were assaulting us now, but I was certainly glad that they weren't fellow humans. I still didn't know how I was going to handle that kind of situation, if and when it cropped up.

But for now, it was a moot point. The fight outside hadn't even been going on for five minutes before the first of the Seraphs tried to jostle and accelerate past our own line of Broadswords, making their way hard and fast towards the hangar bay - both ours and those on the decks above and below us.

"Heavy weapons, you're up!" I yelled into the general COM. "If the defense cannons go offline or they slip past, you're it, so be ready!"

I couldn't do much other than watch as half a dozen Marines wielding M-41 rocket launchers jogged up closer to the hangar bay doors, preparing for the very real possibility that we were going to get boarded soon. It wasn't long before the Suave Affair's large defense cannons started going off just outside the hangar, destroying the first Seraph in a sudden burst of blue and white light. We all let out a celebratory whoop as we saw the wreckage float past, but then the ship suddenly lurched again and our view changed.

For a moment, I felt my heart stop. There were tens of other Seraphs bearing down on us now - and they were bringing along several Phantoms as well. I knew our defense cannons weren't going to stand a chance against firepower like that, unless the Broadswords somehow managed to beat them back. And by the looks of things outside, though they were trying hard, many formerly Covenant starcrafts were still penetrating the lines and getting awfully close.

"Get ready!"

The defense cannons were rattling hard now outside, firing at everything and anything that was hostile and inbound, but although a number of Seraphs burst from the shots, many more were still headed our way - and blasting deadly salvos of plasma right back. In the meantime, the Suave Affair gave another terrible quake, throwing all of us onto the deck as heavy ship-to-ship bombardment continued. Whatever the Seraphs and Phantoms had come out of, it was obviously packing some serious heat - and making our job down here a hundred

times more difficult as the deck beneath us was recurrently displaced. This wasn't like fighting a battle on solid ground planetside at all. This was much more fluid, much more frightening, and much more unpredictable.

I started to think how awful it would be to have survived all the events of the Human-Covenant War only to die here, helpless aboard a ship during a time of supposed peace. I was determined not to let it happen to me - or to my Marines. Scrambling fast back to my feet and behind cover, I shouted, "Get up, Marines! On your feet, now! Take cover, man your guns, and be on the ball for when they try to board! Move!"

Just as we'd settled back into our positions, another huge explosion rocked the deck again. It wasn't strong enough to throw us back on our rears again, but it was moderately unnerving nonetheless. When I looked up from my instinctive crouch to see what it'd been, I saw that one of the defense cannons outside had just been blown to bits in space. The other wasn't looking too good, either, already sparking and smoking from multiple plasma hits. It wouldn't be long now before the fight landed right in our laps, here inside the ship.

"Natalie!" Major Hayden suddenly cried into my helmet's COM. I could hear dozens of weapons going off in the background on his end, and so I already knew what the hail was about. "They're in on our side! Blew right past our cannons and blasted the hell out of us with their turrets before disembarking troops! It's the Covenant Remnant!"

Also known as the Storm, the Remnant was all that was left of the former Covenant - those who'd decided they didn't like abiding by the truce the Elites had made with humanity to end the war four years ago. They were religious extremists in their own cultures from what I knew, and unfortunately for all of us, they weren't too few in number and still posed a considerable threat to the UNSC - at least this far out in our territory.

Some days, it was beginning to feel like everyone had a bone to pick with us now - not just the neo-rebels.

"\_Dammit\_," I muttered. "What are they packing, Hayden?"

"It's a catch-all group, Cooper. Elites, Grunts, and Jackals. Be prepared to go through all the anti-boarding procedures - we're going to need to use everything we've got on this one."

"Acknowledged." Switching to the general channel, I said, "Marines, this is Major Cooper! Enemy forces have now infiltrated the starboard side of the ship! I repeat, we've got enemy on board! It's the Storm! We need everyone on hand for this! Snipers, get to your posts on the second level and provide cover fire for the men below! Target the Jackal sharpshooters first! Heavy weapons, do what you can to disable or destroy any incoming craft before they land! MGs and SAW gunners, try to take as many of the bastards out while the emerge as you can!"

"The rest of you, pick your targets and let 'em have it!"

The fighting began in earnest then as the second - and last - defense cannon for the hangar bay went out with a bang. Two Seraphs and a Phantom came hurtling in soon afterward, and suddenly the whole deck

was awash with heavy plasma rounds.

"Stay behind cover, Marines!" I cried, even as a mound of metal crates behind me took a direct hit from one of the Seraphs. I ducked low and pressed my back harder against my own stack, feeling the instant rush of heat from the discharge - and knowing that if my cover took a hit like that, I'd be positively cooked. "Heavy weapons, now's the time! Give 'em all you've got!"

Three of the Marines with M-41s attempted to do what they could, though the incoming stream of fire from the ex-Covenant aircrafts was unrelenting. A pair of rockets managed to hit one of the Seraphs, blowing out a good chunk of armor and making the craft spark blue-white, but it landed anyway while at the same time, the Phantom opened up its side hatches and Storm troops jumped out.

"Snipers!" I shouted then. It was the only thing I had time to say.

Several loud cracks from sniper rifles resounded through the hangar bay almost immediately, dropping four Jackals and two Elites in mid-air, their bodies hitting with a wet smack onto the deck below. At least part of the ground was covered in glistening deep purple blood now; I hoped little red would follow.

With the Phantom dashing back out into space and the wounded Seraph getting blown to bits from another rocket, that left just one for us to deal with. A thirty-caliber machine gun opened up in front, doing its best to pick off small pieces of the craft's armor, but of course it wasn't enough on its own. I wished for a fifty-cal instead. The unfortunate gunner was quickly spotted by the pilot, and subsequently got turned into burnt plasma-scorched paste. Two more rockets streaked through the hangar, hitting their mark, but the Elite pilot still managed to escape from his now-sparking Seraph.

"Marines, nail that son of a bitch!"

Tens of assault rifles opened up on both the alien pilot and the others who'd left the Phantom unscathed. The skirmish was over fast and bloody, as we still had the advantage of numbers for the moment. When it was all said and done, the Elite pilot had been torn to shreds by a SAW, half its torso ripped open by the rounds and its armor absolutely bullet-riddled. No amount of personal shielding could have withstood an attack like that. The bodies of the others were littered on various parts of the deck as well, lying in large pools of multi-colored blood. It was over just as quickly as it'd begun.

That didn't mean things were over indefinitely, though. We had a momentary reprieve, and that was it. In the void of space just outside the hangar deck, Seraphs as well as Phantoms continued to swirl through the star-dotted black - and we were still the intended target.

"Heavy weapons, reload!" I yelled into the COM. "Snipers, reload! If anybody needs more ammo, now's the time! The rest of you, keep your eyes peeled and stay sharp! More enemy fighters inbound!" Quickly switching channels to my private one with Hayden, I said, "Hayden? Anything new over there?"

It took him a while to answer, and when he did, the reply was clipped and hard to hear over the sound of an MG rattling loud beside him. "Busy fending 'em off! Watch the viewports! Some of the Phantoms aren't waiting for an invitation to come in! They're busting through the windows to force their own airlocks through! Watch your fucking six!"

\_Shit. \_"Marines, make sure you've got a fireteam aimed on our tail! This isn't the only door the Remnant's found to get in! We might have company from the inside soon! Top to bottom, stay vigilant!"

I didn't like the idea of getting cornered in our own damn ship. If the alien bastards were getting in through the viewports now, too, this bad situation was about to get worse. A whole fucking lot worse. Sparing a moment of attention, I turned sideways for a second to glance at the hatch behind me, heading into the ship's hallways. If the enemy came through from the inside, I was going to be the first to get shot in the back, and wouldn't know it till it was too late.

I'd had my back broiled by plasma fire once already - six years ago during the war, on Heath. I'd spent an entire month in the intensive care unit of an orbital hospital recovering, including endless rounds of surgery to hide the scars. It wasn't something I wanted to experience ever again.

I was just about to order a handful of the Marines in front of me to post themselves at the back hatches when my aide, Staff Sergeant Joshua Porter, came running in.

"Sorry I'm late, Major!" he said. "I was off-duty and asleep in my rack and - "

Despite the current circumstances, I found a small grin begin to form on my face. "Jesus Christ, Josh. If you can sleep through all this, you deserve a damn medal. And I want to know your secret. I don't get enough sleep as it is."

"Heh, wasn't planning on it, ma'am, but I only woke up when the whole ship jerked and dumped me on the floor. I'm on the top bunk so I hit pretty hard."

"Well, either way, it's good of you to join us. I hope you brought reinforcements, because we're just getting started here." I gestured to the view outside. "And there's plenty more where those came from."

"Yes, ma'am, brought my squad with me. Anyplace you can use fifteen more?"

I nodded. "Take eight and have them cover this hatch out to the hallway, and post the other half on the hatch on the other side. I hear from Major Hayden that the Cov - the Remnant's finding some other places to get in now. So we've got to cover all our bases."

"Got it, Major. I'll get them moving now."

"And Porter?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

I gestured to his weapon. "You and that SAW are sticking up front. Leave the hatches to your squad."

"Understood."

\* \* \*

><p>Sadly for us, the Storm didn't wait to continue the assault. In spite of our pilots' best efforts, Seraphs and Phantoms were still getting through, and we were rapidly running out of heavy ammunition to hold them off. Now, instead of trying to blow them away, we had no choice but to allow the Phantoms to swoop in, and only then snipe or shoot down whatever alien soldiers they threw out at us.</p>

\_Come on, Will,\_ I thought to myself, knowing he was out there somewhere in the void. \_I know you're trying, but you guys've got to keep them out of our hair. We've got no way to repel all this firepower with just rifles and MGs.\_

Just as the thought finished forming in my mind, yet another Phantom landed inside our hangar bay, making that four in a row now that had rapidly come in, splashed hot lances of plasma all around the place to keep everyone under cover, dropped troops, and then swooped back out into the battle in space. We had five squads of Marines in here now, but there was also close to a platoon of ex-Covenant to fight, too.

I'd issued all the orders I could for now. Every single Marine inside the bay was already doing their job - snipers were still doing the best they could to help stem the oncoming tide, heavy weapons were waiting to select targets, and the rest were firing their guns as fast as they could, taking out anything that got too close. MGs and SAW gunners were burning through belts of ammo at a time, keeping the majority from advancing. Yet still, there was plenty of mop-up duty to go around.

Tired of managing the troops from the sidelines, I took a quick glance around to make sure nothing had me in its sights, then sprinted out from behind my cover, moving to a lower stack of crates and a position closer to the main skirmish. Once there, I rapidly brought my MA5D to bear, aimed at the nearest group of aliens, and let loose a tight burst.

The Elite I'd caught in my crosshairs let out a sudden roar, turning its own weapon on me just as fast as I had on it. It was a gun I hadn't seen before; it looked something like an elongated carbine, but fired similarly to a plasma rifle. \_So they've been busy during the "truce", too, making new toys. \_I smirked.\_ Well, so have we, alien boy. Hope you like the taste of dozens of SAW bullets hitting your face.\_

"Porter! Gimme a hand over here!"

My aide looked over after killing off the last of a small team of Grunts off to the side and responded, "Yes, ma'am! Moving!"

In the meantime, as soon as the Elite's gun overheated, I popped back up from cover and sprayed a longer, fuller burst in its direction.

Its shields absorbed all the rounds it could until they finally failed, leaving the alien with only armor plating as its protection. \_Now you know how we feel,\_ I thought bitterly.

"Now, Josh! Unload on him!"

Like its pilot buddy, the Elite now had no recourse. Without shields to keep some of the bullets from penetrating, the shear rate of fire of the SAW quickly overwhelmed him and pierced through its armor. The alien groaned and gurgled as multiple holes suddenly appeared all over its chest, oozing purple blood. His body hit the ground a second later in a heap, dead.

While Porter ducked to reload, I finished up by taking out the five Grunts the Elite had had with it. Needler rounds bounced off the edge of our cover, exploding in tiny crystalline shards the moment they hit, but I waited for the rain of pink arrows to stop before coming back up and pulling the trigger. It was my last ten rounds of the clip, and they hit home, splashing more alien gore and light blue blood onto the deck. In quick succession, the Grunts fell as well, and Porter and I were left with nothing to shoot at.

I dropped back under cover to reload myself now, breathing hard as I rapidly ejected the spent clip and took out another from my web belt. Slapping the fresh mag home, I cocked the rifle and nudged the staff sergeant with the toe of my boot. "On to the next group, Josh. Let's move."

We paused for just a moment as a frag grenade suddenly came sailing through the air in front of us, obviously trying to hit the aliens coming up behind the ones we'd just taken out, but missing its mark horribly. The grenade burst directly on the pile of Storm bodies we'd left there, and a second later, there was a huge detonation that rattled the deck beneath our feet.

"Holy shit!" Porter cried, still curled against our cover. "What the hell?"

"Plasma grenades!" I shouted back. "They must've dropped them when they died!" And subsequently, they'd gone off in tandem with the frag when it had burst against them.

Though my words to Porter were firm and matter-of-fact, I could feel my heart hammering in my chest from the close call. Still, we couldn't dawdle forever. I slapped my aide on the back of his torso armor as I stood. "Just count your lucky stars we hadn't moved yet, Staff. Now, we'll go."

It seemed it still wasn't meant to be, though. As soon as we started to move forward again, the \_Suave Affair\_ was hit, and the entire deck underneath us shifted again. This time was particularly bad, throwing both Marines and Storm troops flat on their faces as both sides fought one another - and hard. I landed on the ground in a heap, my helmet connecting with the side of a metal crate as I went down. For a minute my head spun from the blow, and when I tried to open my eyes, everything was spinning. I started to feel sick.

\_Damn,\_ I thought to myself when I could formulate even that much of a coherent idea. \_What the hell is going on out there?\_

It was then that another thought, more urgent than the last, came to mind. What if we beat back the Storm troops here in the hangar, inside of the ship, only to be destroyed by them on the outside?

## 15. Chapter 14: Fire in the Night

### \*\*Chapter Fourteen: Fire in the Night\*\*

Willis was no green pilot; he knew from the war just how talented and tenacious his alien counterparts could be in the cockpit. In the six years he'd spent fighting them, he'd never underestimated his opponents. He knew he was good and could pull his ass out of the fire in a pinch, but he gave his enemies their due as well. The ex-Covenant - the Storm - were currently proving their worth and holding their own even now against the Suave Affair. And against Hawk's seasoned squadron of Broadswords, too.

Much to the captain's dismay, he could see tens of alien starcrafts making their way towards the large transport ship's hangar bays - and fighting somewhere inside one of those was his wife. They had to do better than this.

"Kilo, time to kick it into overdrive!" Hawk shouted into the COM. "We're letting too damn many through! Let's step it up and make sure we're not leaving all the heavy lifting to the ground-pounders inside the ship! Get closer!"

"We're outnumbered, Talon!" one of his pilots, callsign "Fargo", replied. "We can't - !"

Willis wasn't often angry, but this time he let some of his frustration show. "Did I not just give you an order? Follow it, no excuses! We're here to protect the ship, and we better do our jobs or we all pay! Where are you going to refuel and rearm if there's no damn boat left out here for us?"

That shut Fargo up quick, and Captain Hawk was relieved. There was plenty more to focus on in the blackness of space without having to deal with a fellow pilot who was close to being insubordinate. The captain hit his COM again to hail his best friend.

"Snoopy? Got my six?"

"'Course, Talon. You tell me when and where and I'll be there."

"I'm tightening up the formation. We're retreating closer to the ship. Fighting out here is doing nothing but exhausting us and leaving the rest of our complement undefended."

There was a pause, then Brandon asked quietly, "You mean Natalie?"

"I mean everyone." He sighed. "But yeah. Her, too. We're spread too thin near the Affair.. I've been getting too many reports of shit getting through. This stops now." \_Or we're not making it to Khan,\_ he added glumly to himself.

A hot streak of plasma pushed him from his musings then as it illuminated the viewplate of his Broadsword, coming close enough to make him see spots in his vision for a moment from the brightness. Hawk jerked up on the controls as he glanced down at his tactical display, trying to figure out where the boiling lance had come from.

As if reading his mind, Captain Heat suddenly announced, "He's on your flank, Talon, three o'clock!"

Captain Hawk spotted him and nodded to himself. "Got it!"

Willis turned just in time to watch the enemy craft boost past him, obviously trying to go for Brandon now. Opening up with its plasma cannons, it followed Heat in a ballet of banks and rolls, never quite getting a lock on him. In the meantime, Hawk pushed on the throttle of his own F-41 and sprayed the target with a long burst of fire from his autocannons, hoping to keep it distracted enough to not incinerate his wingmate.

"Snoopy, he's right on your tail!" Willis shouted.

"Yeah, you think I don't know that?" Brandon yelled back as he suddenly banked hard to port.

Hawk was worried about his friend as he trailed behind them, and his thumbs hovered over the button to launch missiles. Yet he didn't dare fire, since the Storm craft was too close and Heat could easily get caught up in the resulting explosion himself. Instead, Willis continued to strafe with his autocannons, hoping to take the bastard out one purple-armored piece at a time. It encouraged him to see that parts of the Seraph were already sparking blue, although it wasn't enough for the moment. More firepower was needed, and for that, Hawk needed his friend to get clear of the blast zone.

"Push hard on your thrusters, Snoopy! I'm going to launch!"

"Dammit, I'm too close, Talon!"

"Just do it!"

"Aw fuck - !"

The captain finally got a good lock on the Seraph and hit the both buttons for missile launch, then broke off from the attack to avoid getting blown up himself, forcing his Broadsword hard and fast to starboard. He watched his tactical display and saw Heat making a similar evasive maneuver, rocketing up and away from the Seraph as rapidly as he could.

A second later, the ex-Covenant craft burst in a brilliant display of white and blue, raining hot metal parts and adding to the growing debris field from the fight. Hawk immediately searched his scanners and the skies for his buddy, but so far everything was coming back blank. Willis's heart dropped to his stomach as he began to look more frantically now.

\_Shit. Heat, you better be out here somewhere. That blast wasn't big enough for two crafts. You've got to still be - \_

"Christ, Talon. Some fucking friend you are! Next time you want to wipe me off the map along with your alien buddies, make sure it ain't me in the cockpit!" he heard Brandon shout over the COM. "You're lucky I'm such an ace pilot or I would've been toast!"

Willis suddenly laughed, more out of a huge sense of relief than anything else. "You were fine, you pansy. I know what I'm doing and I got that bird off your tail, so quit your whining." He pushed lightly on the controls and the Broadsword dipped. "Now come on, we've got to get back to the ship. Look for targets."

Hawk heard a sigh on the other end as he saw his friend's F-41 line up with his. "Why I follow you, I'll never understand."

"Because I'm your CO?" Willis supplied.

"Yeah, yeah, God help us for that." There was a pause, then, "Hey, you seeing this?"

"See what?"

"Check your boards. There's a huge - "

Captain Hawk saw it then, suddenly streaking past. It wasn't another round from a Seraph's or a Phantom's plasma cannon. It was a gigantic hurtling mass of blue plasma, and it was headed straight for the \_Suave Affair\_.

"Oh, Jesus!"

Willis and Brandon both watched as the massive round hit the \_Affair\_ right in the center on the starboard side. The entire ship gave a violent lurch, and from the looks of things, the hull barely held together from the impact. Hawk was so stunned he didn't say a word, just pushed his craft forward harder towards the boat, almost out of reflex.

The \_Suave Affair\_ couldn't take many more hits like that, Hawk knew. And the threat of the Storm ship wasn't something Willis and his pilots could actively counter. His frustration rose as fear once again gripped his throat. The thought that Natalie was in there taking the heat wouldn't leave his mind.

"Talon?" Brandon suddenly asked. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Hawk replied. "Sometimes I wonder about those swabbies aboard the boat, though. Just how far up their asses are their damn heads?"

"Cool it, man. I'm sure they're doing their best."

The captain snorted in response. "So far, I've only watched them \_take\_ hits. When are they - "

That's when he saw it - something beneath the ship was spooling up. Something even bigger than what the Storm had just dished out. And it was aiming right for the enemy ship. A small grin appeared on Willis's face as he hit the squadron-wide COM.

"Kilo, standby. Looks like the \_Affair\_'s finally going to show those

alien bastards what she's got."

Their ship launched an enormous MAC round at the comparatively smaller Storm ship then, and the impact was devastating. The former Covenant ship's shields flickered and failed in the face of the onslaught, and the round blew a sizable hole into the hull. Hawk watched as ship parts and tiny figures - aliens - were blown out into space.

Captain Heat gave a whoop. "Yeah! That's what I'm talking about! Take that, fuckers!"

In the meantime, Willis's grin widened, but he knew the fight wasn't over just yet. "All right. That was a huge help, but that doesn't mean we can sit back and enjoy the fireworks now. We've still got to protect the *Affair* from those incoming fighters." *\_But the sooner the *Affair* destroys their ship, the better it'll be for all of us,* Hawk thought.

One more round. That was all it would take the *Suave Affair* to have a massive hull breach wherever it hit. But it was also one more round that could definitively take out the smaller Storm ship, too. It all depended on who was able to strike gold first.

Though the battle was far from over, Willis began to have more hope now, even as he noticed the steady stream of Phantoms and Seraphs still making their way near their ship's hangar bays. A few went up in smoke from the squadron of Broadswords close to the *Affair*, but a handful were getting through nonetheless. Hawk was determined to drastically reduce that number now that his own squadron was inbound to help.

"Valkyrie Squadron, this is Talon, commanding Kilo," he said over the COMs. "Thought you could use some backup."

"Yes, sir!" one of the pilots answered. "I'm sure you know where to park yourself, and we'll greatly appreciate any assist you give, Talon."

After eliminating three more incoming Seraphs with the help of his wingmate, Captain Hawk then took a moment to do a quick flyby near the ship before returning to the fight. What he saw was encouraging and would aid the Marines inside - including Cooper - immeasurably. Yet at the same time, it would put his own pilots out here at risk.

Finally, the hangar bay doors on all decks were closing shut.

## 16. Chapter 15: Resurgence

Author's Note: Hey guys, sorry for the brief hiatus. I really wanted to finish my other story before I got back to this one, and I did. So, without further ado...here's the next chappy. :)

Hope you enjoy!

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Fifteen: Resurgence<strong>

The fight inside the hangar bay was still going strong when the deck shuddered beneath our boots again, but it didn't feel like a hit this time. It felt more like something was spooling up under the ship. A small grin formed on my face as I realized it had to be a MAC round. Finally, we were dishing out the hurt instead of just taking it.

"Keep at it, Marines!" I shouted. "We need these alien bastards off the hangar deck, now!"

I glanced over at Staff Sergeant Porter beside me and gave him a slight nod. He understood and followed after me as we moved in even closer to thick of the fray. After nearly getting caught up in a giant grenade blast, I tried to avoid taking cover near any Storm bodies, but it was hard to find an empty space on the deck by now. I hadn't even realized just how long we'd been fighting - and just how many enemy troops we'd beaten back - until I searched the hangar for a safe spot. It seemed most of the ground now was covered in wreckage and gore.

"Take cover behind that crate over there, Josh!" I said to Porter once I found a place that suited our needs. My aide rapidly complied and ran over, SAW in hand, and positioned himself first so that he could provide suppressive fire as I sprinted towards it myself. Once there, I all but dove behind the crate before bringing my own assault rifle to bear again and letting loose a long spray of gunfire. That's when I felt the ship lurch as an enormous MAC round launched toward the Storm ship outside.

Finally, I thought to myself. I was starting to think the swabbies above decks were asleep at the wheel.

In any case, whatever was going on out in space wasn't my direct concern - or anything I could do something about. My job was to take care of things inside. So I did. While the ship-to-ship battle continued to rage beyond the hangar bay doors, my rounds and Porter's ended up hitting another concentrated group of Grunts and Jackals, all of which were positively swarming the deck now that so many Phantoms had gotten through. More alien blood splattered across the ground, awash in several different colors now, while in the meantime, Porter and I tried our best to keep out of range of any incoming plasma or needles aimed at us. When he'd burned through another third of his ammo belt, the staff sergeant paused and let me handle the rest. There wasn't a whole lot of SAW ammunition left.

If ever we needed something drastic to happen to change the tide of the skirmish, it was now.

As I emptied the rest of my clip into an oncoming Grunt's head, I looked up to see the huge hangar bay doors finally beginning to shut. I wondered how things had gotten operational again, but didn't dwell on it for long. I was just grateful as hell that something was being done to give us a hand.

It was as I was reloading my MA5D that I heard Major Hayden's voice come in over my helmet COM.

"We've reestablished contact with the bridge, Cooper! Our power was down from when we got hit the first time, that's why nothing's been

working. Shipboard COMs are back online now, though, and so are the elevators. And thankfully for us, the bay door controls, too."

I hit my own COM in return. "I see it now, Hayden! Hangar doors are closing on our side!"

Just as I began to inwardly jump for joy, though, a tough thought made its way into my mind. With the bay doors shut, my Marines and I had a much better shot at restoring order on the ship - but that also meant that Willis and the other pilots outside had no way back onboard. The realization hit hard, and I resolved to get things done as quickly as I could on the inside so that my husband could have a safe retreat, too. I activated my COM again fast, this time addressing only the men with me on the same deck.

"Marines, this is Major Cooper! We've got good news and bad news! Good news is, our power's back online and the doors are sealing shut. Bad news is, that leaves our flyboys on the outside no options to land or refuel. So let's clear out this hangar bay, Marines! On the double!"

Though we'd all been fighting fiercely for the last fifteen to twenty minutes, everyone got straight to work again once my orders were issued. Something about the doors closing and things finally starting to go our way had invigorated everyone, including myself, and we now had a fresh purpose and momentum going. I watched as different specialized teams of Marines around the bay began rattling off rounds even more at the Storm troops, now stuck inside with no escape. Things went very quickly from a two-sided assault to shooting fish in a barrel for sport. But it wasn't over just yet.

I keyed the COM again just as I watched the nearest Elite shove its plasma sword into a fellow Marine and paused. The young lance corporal let out a blood-curdling wail as she was gutted in an instant, insides getting flash-seared, and I cringed and looked away despite myself. I'd taken a similar hit in Ecuador, while I'd been three months pregnant with the second child I'd eventually lost. It was the hit that had cost my baby's life - and had nearly done me in, too, if I hadn't been stabbed right on a field hospital's doorstep. I was lucky the attack hadn't had much power behind it and the blade hadn't gone straight through out my back, like it did with the Marine in front of me. Otherwise, nothing would've saved me.

Momentarily lost in the memory, I was jarred back to the present by Staff Sergeant Porter, who gripped my shoulder hard and gave me a shove.

"Ma'am! I'm jammed! And that thing's headed right for - !"

Just as I reacted fast and brought my own gun back up to defend us, my aide's cry was drowned out by the sudden crack of a sniper rifle from the level above. Apparently the sharpshooters still had our six, and someone up there had seen the lance corporal get disemboweled. Before the Elite headed over to us next, its helmet suddenly broke in two, dark purple blood showering the bulkhead behind it. The formidable alien dropped to the deck in a heap, dead, and I glanced over at Porter.

"Taken care of, Staff," I said. Finally able to open that channel, I did so and replied, "Great work, snipers! Keep up the fire! We need

to clear this bay as fast as we can, and then we tackle any other Storm forces that managed to board!" I switched to my private one with my best friend right after. "Hayden?"

"Yeah, Cooper. Go ahead."

"How many breaches do we got? Any reports from the bridge now that comms have been restored?"

"Uh...yeah. Six viewport breaches. Four on our deck, one above and one below. Marines are already moving to clear the other two, I got one on my side, so that leaves three on yours, Natalie. Sorry."

"\_Dammit\_. Okay, we'll handle it. Cooper out."

That wasn't good news. But I'd been placed in hairy situations dozens of times in my career - some much worse than this. There was no choice but to carry on and do your part. I nudged Porter with my boot and gestured that we shift to another position, further behind. He needed to get his SAW functioning again, and I couldn't risk taking anymore close calls. It would be bad for the unit if they showed up to Khan without their commander. And I wasn't exactly looking to go into early retirement like this.

"Let's move, Josh! Right now! We'll get behind the extra ammo crates and you get that weapon working again, understood?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

We waited for the right opportunity when most of the skirmishes were diverted away from us, then sprang up and sprinted for cover. Aiming somewhat with my assault rifle, I let loose a sustained burst to keep wandering enemy heads down, and though a few stray plasma shots splashed the deck beside us nearby, nothing hit. Porter and I dashed to the relative safety of the crates once more, ducked behind them, and then he immediately got to work trying to unjam his weapon.

"Got half the belt left, Major," he said, breathing hard from the run. I could see sweat coming down his face from beneath his helmet. "But it won't do me much good like this."

"No," I agreed. "And we're going to need it to clear the ship. We've got three breaches to tackle after this."

"\_Three\_, ma'am?"

I flashed him a small grin. It was one of those laugh-or-cry moments, so I chose the former. "Yep. How's that for a wake-up call?"

"I'm never sleeping again, ma'am."

"You'll want to once this is over, trust me. Got it yet?"

The staff sergeant's concentration was fierce. "Almost...there!" He cocked the SAW and it gave a satisfying \_click\_. "Loaded and ready, Major."

"Good. Now we can - "

The Suave Affair shuddered underneath us for what seemed like the millionth time in the last several minutes. But like before, it didn't feel like an incoming hit. The swabbies were sending out another round.

This time, the grin on my face was sincere. I hoped this next round would be the killing blow to the Storm ship outside; we needed it. I slapped Porter on the shoulder plates. "Come on, Staff. Let's get back to it. This might be over quicker than we thought."

\* \* \*

><p>The fight inside the hangar bay was all but over when the news came down to us straight from the bridge - the enemy ship that had launched the assault against us as we'd passed by was nothing but space debris now. The swabbies above decks had come through and done their job - and well.</p>

There was still no word on how the pilots were faring outside, though, and that worried me - even though I knew that with their ship gone, the Storm craft had nowhere to go now. They couldn't land anywhere, refuel, or do anything else except wait to be picked off by our flyboys. They were at our Broadswords' mercy, and that was an encouraging thought. Though there was still a strong chance the Storm pilots would take some of ours down with them.

Please be careful, Will, I thought as I pumped the last of my clip into a Jackal's side. Don't take a hit at the last minute. It's almost done.

Much as it plagued my mind, I couldn't let the thought take over. I had to believe that Willis would hold his own and be okay. For now, I had to devote my full attention to getting my Marines out of the hangar bay and back into the corridors of the ship, where we would go room by room, window by window, and look for where the enemy airlocks had parked.

While I ducked back behind cover to reload, noting I had only two magazines left on my ammo pouch, a final sniper shot rang out. I glanced up to see the last shielded Jackal collapse onto the bloody deck.

And with that, the battle was finished.

The sniper's voice - as well as his name, Second Lieutenant Hudson - flooded my helmet. "Ma'am, this is Hudson, in charge of Major Hayden's sniper team. Hangar bay is clear, Major."

I stopped myself from releasing a sigh of relief. Now wasn't the time, and the job still wasn't over. Though it was a great step in our favor. "Glad to hear it, Lieutenant. Thanks for the overhead coverage. You saved my ass back there with that Elite."

"No problem, ma'am. It's what we're here for."

"All right," I said then as I stood. Walking over to another set of crates, I reached inside and pulled out five fresh clips of ammunition for my MA5D as I spoke. "Get ready to sweep up the rest of the deck now, Marines. Snipers, you're to stay here and guard the doors in case anything goes awry - the power goes out again, you find

a few stragglers, anything. If something does happen, I want to be notified immediately. Clear?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"The rest of you, replenish your ammo and lock and load. This'll be close quarters fighting, and we've got three busted viewports to account for. We don't know how many Storm troops might have made it inside, and they could be lurking anywhere. Keep your head on a swivel and let's move."

We left the hangar bay a positive mess as we filed out. There were still-smoking wrecks of Phantoms and Seraphs littering the ground, and both Storm troops and Marine bodies lay scattered on the floor. While I jogged out into the ship's halls along with my Marines, I quickly checked my HUD for a list of UNSC casualties. Twelve Marines had lost their lives in the battle. Though it wasn't much in comparison to the number of enemy warriors we'd taken out, it was still more than I liked to see. We'd have to do better when we cleared the airlocks.

\* \* \*

><p>Breaking up the Marines with me into teams of five, we managed to sweep the port side deck fast. Two of the viewport breaches had already been found and swiftly dealt with, the number of Storm troops never numbering more than about eight or ten, and easily taken care of when one or two Marine fireteams backed up another. Now there was just one more to go, and I had a feeling the next set was just beyond this hatch. It was curiously sealed shut, which indicated a possible atmosphere vent, and the tech-savvy Marine at the head of my group had just turned back to give me a thumbs-up.</p>

"Got the green light, Major. We can open this up now. We'll have to be careful if the room's in vacuum, though."

"Or we'll have to end this fight quick," I muttered to myself.  
"Everyone got seals on their helmets?"

"Affirmative, ma'am."

"Then we have ten minutes. Do it, Marine."

The hatch opened and I instantly noticed that the atmosphere was, in fact, still intact. The ship's artificial gravity kept us grounded as before, so there were no worries about that. The one thing that did bother me was the large cluster of Storm troops that greeted us when we stepped through.

I did the one thing I could think of in the moment - pulled a frag from my web belt without a second thought and sent it sailing into the room. "Grenade out!"

My Marines and I quickly moved for cover behind control panels and more metal crates as the stunned aliens scrambled to do something themselves. Being tightly packed in a small space, however, there wasn't anywhere else for them to go. The explosive burst seconds later, sending four Grunts high into the air with sharp cries, and two Elites rolling away as their shields flared. The two Jackals made it out the most intact, ducking behind their translucent orange

shields to avoid the shrapnel.

"Marines, let 'em have it!" I shouted when the dust settled.

Now utterly aware of our presence, the Elite that looked to be in charge of the group let out a loud roar and charged headlong into the sudden flurry of lead coming at him. His personal shielding absorbing the hits as he went, he came up to the first Marine and flung him to the side, the enlisted man grunting and hitting the bulkhead hard as he connected with a metal pipe in the chamber. His vitals flared yellow across my HUD when he landed, but I felt better knowing he was still alive - just knocked out.

The Elite made its way to me then and tried to bowl me over. I emptied my clip into it, barely stopping the alien from tackling me or, worse, trying to choke me out. I'd had enough of those types of fights during the war - I wasn't looking for an encore now. When the two Marines beside me turned their guns on him, too, the bastard was finally cooked. Its shields suddenly failed, and then its blood splattered across our helmets and uniforms before it hit the ground.

"Good," I snarled under my breath. "I like you better as a corpse."

"Ma'am! Watch out!"

I glanced up from the bloodbath just in time to see a plasma grenade soaring across the room towards me. Reacting fast, I launched myself quickly to the side and hit the ground hard, my teeth rattling. I clamped my hands down over my helmet and then the grenade burst, sending debris raining on my armor plates. A wave of heat passed over me, too, all in a rush. And then everything went quiet.

I thought I'd been knocked unconscious myself at first. It turned out my Marines had just eliminated the last of the Storm troops, though. I blinked down at the gray grille of the deck beneath me when I finally opened my eyes. My pulse was pounding in my ears and I tasted blood in my mouth. I inadvertently swallowed it.

A Marine's face greeted me then. I knew it was one of Hayden's because I didn't know him by name. Nonetheless, he crouched down in front of me as he touched my shoulder. "Major? Are you all right?"

I was achy and a little disoriented still, but wasn't about to admit to that to a subordinate. "F-fine, Marine. I've been in scrapes a lot...worse than this."

"I believe it, ma'am," he replied quietly. "The War was a long one."

"Yes it was," I answered wearily. And it looks like it's starting up again, though the Covies are operating under a different name now,\_ I thought to myself.\_ The more things change...\_

I waved the Marine off and pushed myself up from the ground before finishing the thought. That wasn't helpful now. After taking a look around, I nodded in satisfaction at what I saw - eight Storm bodies, and five upright Marines. Even the enlisted man who'd passed out from the hit had been helped by a fellow Marine.

"Fantastic job, everyone," I said then. "Now that this side of the deck's clear, let's head back into the hangar bay and see what we can do about creating some space for our flyboys to land. We made the mess, now we've got to clean it up. I'll report that we're secure to the bridge in the meantime."

As my Marines reloaded and started to move again, I glanced over at the alien corpses in the corner and tried not to think of the grenade that had nearly taken my head off. Damn Elites weren't any different now it seemed, despite our short-lived truce. They still hated the hell out of humans. I wondered what 'Kuatee would've thought of that, and if he would've turned on me today if he'd still been alive. The idea was more distressing than I wanted to admit.

I was saved from hitting the COM myself when Hayden suddenly hailed me.

"Cooper? Can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear, buddy. What's going on?"

"Starboard side is secure, Natalie. Just letting you know. How're you holding up?"

"Same over here, Oliver."

There was a pause. "Wow. Already?"

I couldn't help the smug smirk that appeared on my face, despite the aches and pains from the fight that still plagued me. "Yup. If you want a job done right..."

"Okay, okay, hotshot. I'll send a report up to the bridge. And don't get too damn cocky. I remember when you were known simply as the fraternizer, if you recall."

I snorted. "Only by you, Hayden."

"Be that as it may, I can still bust your ass over it from time to time," he said, amusement clear in his tone. "Nonetheless, nice job."

"Thanks. I'll meet you back in the mess again when we're off-duty and you can buy me a drink." I frowned as a joke, even though I knew my friend couldn't see my expression. "A soda, since these swabbies won't let us have any fun while we're onboard."

He laughed. "You got it. Hayden out."

\* \* \*

><p>I stood pacing the deck in the hangar bay once we made it back. The bay doors still hadn't opened yet, and I wasn't sure if that was the case on the other side, too, or not. I was anxious to see Willis, to make sure with my own eyes that he was okay and hadn't gotten hurt out there in the fighting. UNSC control had been restored on the ship, and all decks cleared and breached viewports sealed, but there were still no friendly pilots aboard. The battle had been relatively short, but the <em>Suave Affair</em> had sustained a moderate amount

of damage, and I knew from both radio hails and from what I'd witnessed myself that there'd definitely been casualties. I just hoped that one of those wasn't my husband.

Finally, after another ten minutes of pacing and running my hand through my hair, I heard a COM click from my helmet. I quickly pushed it back on and listened.

"Marines and shipboard crew, please standby for craft reentry. I repeat, clear the hangar bays. Our birds are coming home."

I wasn't relieved until some time later, when the Broadswords finally landed haphazardly in the corpse- and wreckage-filled bay. Both Marines and Navy crew members had done what they could to make space, but some things would have to wait. We hadn't had time for a spotless cleaning, only a moving around of junk for the pilots to land.

I grinned wide when I saw one in particular emerge from his F-41 Broadsword. Willis spotted me as I none-too-casually jogged up to him, and I was barely able to stop myself from breaking out into a full run that would attract attention. He grinned at me, too.

The first thing we did was kiss, without even thinking about where we were. Then, to cover up the goof, Willis wrapped his arms around me and gave me a big hug - something more tolerable in terms of regulation, given the circumstances.

"Hey, Coop. I'm glad to see you're okay."

"You, too, Will. How was it out there?"

We finally broke apart, and my husband thrust a hand over his own hair. "Crazy, to be honest. But eventually we managed. Suave Affair's hits on that Storm ship helped a lot, and we were able to get the upper hand after that. You?"

"Same. We were in rough shape before those bay doors finally closed. Those Storm bastards had already managed to breach six viewports before we got a handle on it. It's all good now, though."

"Good." His smile widened. "So I guess after we get showers, we can head back to the mess to finish our food."

I chuckled as I gave him a playful shove in his chest. "That's really all you thought about while you were fighting out there, huh?"

"Nah. But I'll admit it was in the back of my mind."

The sobering part came when a Marine ran frantically past us. Everyone turned to look. It took me a moment, but I finally recognized him as First Lieutenant Enson - the Marine who'd helped get things organized when the assault on the ship had first begun. He seemed to be searching each Broadsword as it came in, looking more and more pale when he didn't find what he was looking for.

"Lieutenant Enson!" he shouted. "I'm looking for Lieutenant Kimberly Enson! Anyone seen her?"

My blood went cold, and I couldn't muster up the courage to glance at

Willis. The Marine was looking for his wife, a pilot. While he'd been fighting in here, she'd been out there, just like me and Willis. But unlike us, I got a feeling in the pit of my stomach that this wasn't going to be a happy ending.

A senior Marine pilot eventually approached the lieutenant, and that's when I knew. My heart dropped in my gut, and I felt my husband reach over to grasp my hand out of sight.

"Son, why don't you come over here with me," Major Collins, Willis's air wing commander, said softly to Enson.

The look on his face was something I wish I could forget.

"No, ma'am. No. Please, tell me she's not...just - "

Major Collins squeezed his shoulder. "I'm sorry."

And just like that, the good mood inside the hangar bay at the victory was shot.

#### 17. Chapter 16: Gather at the Watering Hole

\*\*Chapter Sixteen: Gather at the Watering Hole\*\*

I sat down hard on the small chair in our quarters once Willis and I made it back. My husband pushed past me in the cramped room and took a seat on the bed. Neither of us said anything for a while. We were both still in our gear from the fight.

Finally, Willis reached over to take my hand. "Cooper, look at me."

Reluctantly, I glanced up from my gore-covered armor and combat boots to meet his gaze. He gave my hand a squeeze.

"What we saw in the hangar just now...that won't be us, okay? We've been through so much worse already, and we made it. Every single time. And we'll both make it back home to Gabe, and Liam, and Olivia this time, too. It'll all be fine." He sighed as he ran a hand over his short hair. "I know what's going on in that head of yours right now, so just...don't."

I snorted softly. "Don't draw the comparison, you mean?" I released a sigh of my own. "It's something we've been preparing for for a long time, huh? The possibility that one or both of us wouldn't make it back home after the next deployment during the war. We had a nice four-year lull, and now those days are back. What we saw in there just now proves it."

"It doesn't have to mean what you think it does."

"We've been lucky so far, Will. That's all."

"Do you really believe that? You think this mission's going to be it?"

I took a minute to stare at the family picture we'd taped to the bulkhead when we'd first been assigned these quarters. Though I tried

hard, the sudden lump in my throat wouldn't go away - especially when I looked at my kids. I glanced away. "No. I don't know. I guess we'll see when we make it to Khan. But with everything that just happened shipboard right now - "

"Natalie, we got through. Again. That's what happened." Willis gave my hand another reassuring squeeze. "I know things didn't go well for them, but that doesn't mean we're doomed to the same thing. So don't dwell on this. Please."

"Will - "

"Can you promise me that?"

Having fought in and survived so many battles over the years was sometimes a mixed blessing. You were alive, but some parts inside of you weren't anymore, every time you had to witness something horrible happening to someone else. And knowing that one day, it might just happen to you.

Thankfully, though, for today, it hadn't been us. That gave me hope.

"Okay," I said. "Yeah. I can promise that."

"Good." He leaned over to gently press his lips against my own. "I love you, Coop. We did everything we could out there to keep you safe."

"I know. I love you, too," I replied as I kissed him back.

Then, in an effort to lighten the mood, his expression changed suddenly as he made a show of looking over my filthy, blood-drenched uniform with a wrinkled nose. "Now, I think it's time for some showers."

\* \* \*

><p>After a short trek to the female head aboard ship for a wash and a change into some fresh fatigues, I found myself back where we'd been before in the mess. Even our trays were still there, untouched yet shifted around a bit from the fight. My best friend was already sitting there, shoveling in food from our interrupted meal.</p>

"You're just like Willis," I observed as I sat down. "Don't waste any time getting back to what's important."

Hayden wagged a finger at me as he ate. "Hey, my mom always said mealtimes were very important. That disproves your theory right there."

I chuckled. "Whoa. Can't argue with Mom. Man's gotta eat, right?"

"That's right." He pointed to my own tray, still mostly full since I hadn't had much of an appetite earlier. "And you, too. We'll be on Khan soon, and who knows when our next meal will be then."

"Depends on what we find when we get down there."

My best friend shrugged. "We'll know in four more days. Till then, enjoy the three squares a day we get here." He grinned around another mouthful of food. "I know I do."

Rolling my eyes with a small smile of my own, I resumed plucking at my tray. Despite what had occurred inside the hangar bay after the battle, I found that all the fighting had made me hungry. I started spearing bigger forkfuls of food before continuing the conversation. "Any word yet on why there was a lone Storm ship out and about that we didn't know about?"

"I just got a message from the ship's captain a few minutes ago. You should've gotten one, too."

"And?"

"Swabbies don't know yet, but they're looking into it. For now, they think it was just a randomly assigned patrol that we happened to bump into. It's not that uncommon this far out. There's been all sorts of stuff joy-riding around out here post-war."

I swallowed my food as I took in his words. "So should we expect this to occur again before we reach Khan?"

"No one can know for sure, Cooper, but it sounds like the possibility is remote. Should be smooth sailing from here."

"We hope," I muttered.

Hayden raised an eyebrow at me. "Sounds like you're in a funk."

I shrugged noncommittally in reply. Oliver hadn't been present for the end-of-battle fiasco in the hangar bay, and I was loathe to mention it to him. It'd just get him worked up, too. His own wife Courtney was still serving in the fleet somewhere in the Inner Colonies.

"It's gotta be tough jumping back in the fray after four years away," my friend commented after a while.

"Kind of. I kept up with training the whole time. But you know that's different."

"Want to talk about it?"

I finally glanced down at my mostly-empty tray and carefully laid down my fork. "Combat hasn't changed. I was surprised how it all came back to me; training can only do so much for you in a real fight. It felt...normal, and good in some ways to be back. I guess it's just, where before I was so sure of everything and knew what I was fighting for, now it's all...confused. And there's so much more shit out there that wants us dead this time. It can be overwhelming sometimes if I think about it."

"I feel like we've had this conversation before," Hayden said.

I sighed. "You're right. We probably have. Just forget it. Don't worry about it. I'll shake it off and keep going."

"If you say so." My friend suddenly smirked at me. "Maybe you just need to blow off some more steam with that flyboy of yours. Help clear your head."

I smirked in return. "Thanks, but we're fine. And I'm okay. I promise."

Major Hayden's grin remained as he polished off the rest of the food on his own tray. When he was done, he walked around to my side and gave me a slap on the back. "Don't overthink it, Cooper. Just like what happened today, once you're in combat, you won't have any of this stuff on your mind anymore. And you know that. I'll see you in a few days."

\* \* \*

><p>Five minutes later, Willis still hadn't returned to the mess yet. I'd finished my food and was sipping on some hot coffee, wondering where my husband had gone off to after his shower, when Doc Reynolds approached. It'd been several days since I'd seen him around, too.</p>

"Hey, Doc," I greeted him. "Hope the boarding action didn't keep you too busy."

"It was definitely something, ma'am," Reynolds replied. "Got to test my field skills again, make sure I'm ready for when we land on Khan."

"How'd it go?"

"I think I'm ready, Major. I saved three Marines today." A small smile crept across his face. "I don't regret reenlisting now. Feels good to make a difference again where it counts most."

"I'm glad."

His expression sobered after a moment. "Although, it was pretty strange fighting old members of the Covenant again." He ran a hand over his cropped black hair. "There's something about spending almost thirty years of warfare to end a conflict, only to have it rise up again so soon, that makes the effort seem a little futile, you know?" The medic shook his head. "And this whole mess with the neo-rebels...almost makes me feel like we left the galaxy in a worse state than we found it, ma'am. When all we were trying to do was better it."

I snorted before taking another sip. Finally, someone understood exactly how I felt. "We worked so damn hard during the war to ensure a peaceful future for ourselves, and instead, all we've got now is problems compounded on problems."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Just goes to show that history's doomed to repeat itself, Doc. Whether we study it or not."

"Yeah. I just didn't think we'd have to learn that the hard way, Major. Not in our lifetimes, at least."

"Neither did I, to be honest. But look," I said. "This hyper-religious sect of the former Covenant, the Storm, isn't as big a threat as the Covies themselves used to be. And I believe we can work to change the neo-rebels' minds. It's not going to be another all-out fight to survive like before. The UNSC is down but not out, and we've been rebuilding what was destroyed fast. So not everything's lost." I glanced over at him then and met his gaze. "We did good, Michael. It wasn't in vain. And we'll make it back from this, too."

It was only when I said the words aloud that I realized I truly believed them. Willis, as usual, had been right. We'd been through so much worse before during the war. And although it felt like some things hadn't changed as we thought they would, in other ways - more significant ones - they really had. We were no longer in danger of dying out as a species. Many of our colonies had been saved, despite the odds, and we were slowly growing back. The only thing I had to worry about on deployments now was the possibility of myself or my husband not making it home - not that our children might be killed or the planet glassed while we were away.

In those important ways, the war was truly over. And in those days, all our fighting had been worth it. We'd all accomplished that together.

So when I saw Willis finally show up to the table himself, I flashed him a small grin. My husband smiled back, put his arm around me to squeeze my shoulders, and then dug into his meal.

That's what ended up putting my mind at ease.

#### 18. Chapter 17: Arrival

\*\*Chapter Seventeen: Arrival  
><strong>

\*\*Undetermined Shipboard Time, December 18, 2557. \*\*Onboard UNSC Transport Ship Suave Affair, In Orbit Above Planet Khan\*\*. "The First Impression," Outer Colonies. Day One of the New Age of Warfare\*\*

The few days left till we reached Khan passed relatively quickly, and without further incident. There was the usual routine of rotating watches and duty shifts, PT, training, and general gearing up for the ground teams. I'd spent what seemed like the entirety of the last four days in briefings, either solely with my XO getting last minute logistics done, or with the inclusion of each of my company commanders. Hayden and I had met once to discuss how our battalions would work together once on the surface, and the two of us had met jointly with Major Collins to talk about plans for close air support and evac if we needed it. That left me very little time with Willis, which I regretted, but it wasn't something I could help. Now, everyone's main focus was Khan.

Presently, I was zipping up the last of my equipment in the duffel bag that I'd be bringing with me to the surface. Willis watched with an inscrutable expression, though I knew he was feeling a mix of anxiety and hesitation at seeing me go. I was nervous myself, but I'd kept that under wraps in front of my subordinates the last few days.

The people I trusted with that knowledge already knew about my misgivings.

This was the point of no return. None of us knew if the situation would be peaceful or hostile on Khan - if the talks with the locals would go well or make things boil over into another shooting war with our own. Or if there were other aliens involved, besides the Jackal pirates that lurked throughout the system. In a way, I was glad the time had finally come - because in a few hours, I'd know. Beyond a doubt.

"All packed up?" Willis asked as I lifted the heavy bag from our bed to the floor. I placed it next to my smaller pack, filled with survival gear for the field in case things went FUBAR, and a propped up DMR I'd already taken from the shipboard armory.

"Yeah. I think so," I replied, turning towards the desk to pick up my sidearm and holster. "I've got my knives, weapons, ammo, helmet, all of it."

"No armor," he pointed out.

"I got it. We're being issued our pieces when we board the shuttles heading dirtside."

"Who's flying you?"

"Echo Squadron. Pelicans."

"Good group. They'll get you there safe, Cooper."

I smiled faintly. "It's not the ride down that I'm worried about."

"I know. Hopefully the locals will be welcoming, though. You never know."

"I will soon, either way."

I started to heft my pack to put it on my shoulders when my husband got up to stop me. He pulled me into his arms for a moment and kissed the side of my head before holding me tightly.

"Stay safe down there, okay?" he said. I could hear a slight quiver in his voice, and it was hard to keep my own steady, too.

"I will." It was suddenly difficult to see past the moisture in my eyes. "I'm going to miss you, Will."

"I'll miss you, too, honey. But you know I'm just an uplink away. And if anything goes wrong, we'll be down there with you. Don't worry."

"I won't."

I pulled him in closer then and gave him a long, deep kiss. He kissed me back with equal fervor before hugging me one last time.

"I'll see you soon, Coop."

"Yeah. You, too. I'll try to contact you after we've landed, if I can."

"All right. Bye."

"Bye."

\* \* \*

><p>Not long after that, I went below decks to finish putting on the rest of my gear - armor and web belt - and to pick up a few grenades. It'd all have to be stashed away in my duffel bag once we hit dirt so as not to appear hostile to the locals...but I wasn't about to head down to the surface without them. No matter what we were going to encounter, it was always better to be safe than sorry. The war had taught me that.</p>

As soon as that was complete, I made my way to the hangar bay where we'd just repelled the Storm troops a few days ago. It was mostly cleaned up now - the crews had been working overtime to get everything ready for departure, and that meant having a spotless flight deck as well. Returning salutes as I passed, I clambered up onto one of the waiting Pelicans - the first of dozens ready to take the Marines of the 8th Engineer and 904th Infantry Battalions down to Khan. Most of the troops were already loaded up and waiting.

"Major Cooper, ma'am," one of the Marines beside me, a sergeant, said with a quick salute.

I saluted back. "Sergeant."

"Good to have you with us, ma'am. Captain Harris wanted me to let you know he's boarded, too, a few Pelicans over."

"Thank you. I'll link up with him." Pulling on my helmet, I opened up a private channel between myself and my XO. "Harris, it's Major Cooper."

"Ma'am. Glad to hear you've boarded. The rest of the battalion'll get here in a few minutes, and then we'll be ready for take-off."

"Who're we missing still?"

"Second platoon from D Company. They were helping the swabbies clear out the hangar bay earlier. They'll be along shortly, like I said."

"Tell them to hoof it back, Captain. I'm ready to get this show on the road. Tired of sitting on my hands the last four days. I just want to get this over with now."

Captain Harris chuckled over the radio. "Me, too, ma'am. Me, too. I'll get the message across, Major. Give me one."

While I sat there waiting for my XO's reply, I heard even more Pelicans in the bay starting to prep for launch. I supposed the one good thing about the recent boarding attempt was that I was no longer nervous about going into my first firefight in four years - I'd already been through that now. Now, I was simply ready to find out

definitively what the situation was on Khan.

Finally, Harris's voice came back. "Major?"

"Go ahead, Shawn."

"Got on the line with Lieutenant Saunders, ma'am. He said second platoon was boarding now."

"That's great, Harris. Standby for departure then. This is it."

"Yes, ma'am."

Finally, I added silently to myself as I cut the connection. I opened a battalion-wide channel then to address all my Marines. We were boarded and ready now. "Marines, this is Major Cooper. Listen up. You've been told we're not sure what to expect when we get down there, but do not assume locals are hostile. We keep friendly relations and we do not fire unless fired upon. Keep your weapons stowed - everything but your sidearm, and that should be holstered. We'll get down there, make contact with Outpost Columbia's commander, and you'll receive further orders from there. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"We can do this, Marines. We're the 8th Engineers."

"Ooh-rah!"

A small grin formed on my face under my helmet. "Semper fi, and good luck."

Though we left the Suave Affair in high spirits, I didn't say much the rest of the ride planetside. The Marines beside me were caught up in their own things, preparing for the days ahead in their own ways, or busy with conversations. This wasn't going to be a hot insertion, so the mood was a little more relaxed than missions past. Yet still, I spent most of my time inside the Pelican staring down at the picture of my three kids - my seven-year-old and three-year-old twins I'd left behind on Mars. I already missed them all terribly.

Hopefully, it'd be like Hayden said in the mess the other day. Smooth sailing from here.

\* \* \*

><p>The ride down to the surface was shorter than I'd expected, which was good - I knew my face had probably gone white at some point during the flight, and I was suddenly glad for the tinted visor on my helmet. I pulled it off once we landed, though, indescribably happy to be back on real, firm soil again after nearly a month aboard ship in space, and waited for the rest of my Marines to disembark as well. I spotted Captain Harris shortly and made my way over to him first.</p>

He didn't salute me this time when I approached, since we weren't sure yet whether that was safe or not, but instead acknowledged me with a nod. "Major. Where to?"

After clipping my helmet onto my pack, I grabbed my datapad out of one of my cargo pockets and flicked it on. "Outpost Columbia should be half a klick west from here - that way," I pointed. "Order the company commanders and lieutenants to gather up their platoons and then start the march. Me and you will take a security detail and move on ahead in the meantime. I've got to meet with the commander ASAP."

Harris nodded. "Yes, ma'am. I'm on it."

We started off through the clearing with my aide, Staff Sergeant Porter, and his squad in tow, pistols out and ready for anything as we approached the UNSC-controlled outpost via the forest. As I walked around, I had to admit - Khan was a beautiful planet, its mystery to us notwithstanding. The moist, red earth underneath our boots reminded me a lot of my home planet of Mars, and its tall redwoods with dark green needles gave the surroundings a look of calm serenity. I knew better, of course; I'd fought in all kinds of terrain before, and in all kinds of weather. But that, coupled with the temperate climate and the cloudless blue sky overhead, made it an inviting welcome to the place.

I glanced down at my watch then just as we began to see the first pre-fab buildings of the outpost. It'd already synced up to local time. It was 1403 hours here in the southern tip of Khan - a gorgeous, sunny afternoon past the tall canopy of the treetops. I hoped the peace wouldn't be shattered by an incoming mortar round or gunfire, all of which the outpost had been receiving with increased frequency lately. It was the entire reason we were here - to demonstrate to the locals - and to any other hostiles that might be in the area - that the UNSC wouldn't tolerate aggressive behavior for long, and that it needed to stop.

Finally, when we were within sight of the guards around the perimeter, I placed a small COM bud in my ear and motioned for the security team to halt and crouch beside me. "UNSC Outpost Columbia, this is Major Natalie Cooper, commanding the 8th Engineer Battalion, UNSC Marines. Do you copy?"

The response was immediate and gruff. "We hear you, Major. Please confirm identity."

"Major Cooper, Natalie McKenzie. UNSC Service number 38221-50486-NC."

"Voice match confirmed. You're free to approach, ma'am. And welcome to Outpost Columbia."

\* \* \*

><p>It turned out it wasn't the commander who immediately greeted us, but a young second lieutenant instead - probably his aide. Before approach, I'd ordered the Marines with me to holster their sidearms, and we'd moved quickly from there into friendly territory. Though the forest was nice aesthetically, I felt better once we were within the confines of the UNSC outpost with fellow Marines.</p>

"Major Cooper," the lieutenant said. Since we were now inside the main building, she saluted, and I returned the gesture. "We're

grateful you're here, ma'am. We could really use a friendly face around here. I'm not sure if you've been notified yet, but the attacks have gotten worse since your departure from Earth almost four weeks ago. I'm guessing your intel's likely outdated by now. My commander will brief you on that later."

I frowned, not wanting to admit that I hadn't really received much intel to begin with. "Where's the commander now, Lieutenant?"

"Colonel Dwight sends his apologies, ma'am, but he won't be able to meet with you until later this evening. Something urgent came up that he's attending to now, so he sent me instead to make sure you and your Marines are squared away." She scratched the back of her head sheepishly. "The outpost is about to get a lot more crowded. We weren't initially set up to hold an extra two battalions of Marines. But we've spent the time while you travelled getting things ready for your and Major Hayden's arrival, ma'am. It'll be a tight fit, but we put in some new barracks for both battalions to stay in. Your Marines will be up to six in a room, but you and the other major, of course, will each be billeted in your own separate quarters."

"Thank you," I said. Though I hated to live in relative luxury while my Marines got stacked into rooms like sardines, I didn't want to seem ungrateful for the outpost commander extending a courtesy to Hayden and I because of our ranks. We'd all known going into this that living on the outpost was rougher than an actual base - it was the nature of the beast, especially in the Outer Colonies. And if things really were getting worse around here, I suspected that none of us would be spending much of our time indoors anyway.

"Is Major Hayden here with you as well? May I show each of you to your quarters, and where your battalions will be staying?"

I shook my head. "As far as I know, Major Hayden's not off the boat yet. He should be here shortly, though. In the meantime, I wouldn't mind dumping my own gear."

"Of course, ma'am. It's right this way."

We walked down the hall towards what I'd come to think of as the rear of the base, the way we'd approached coming in. Just beyond the mess hall, in the center of the outpost with a heavily fortified roof, there were two long, separate wings of barracks - but they weren't designated male and female. As with all forward outposts, there wasn't enough room or much worry here to keep men and women separate. There were bigger fish to fry than that. One side was Hayden's infantry battalion, the other was for my engineers.

"On the right side are the quarters we've provided for your battalion, Major," the lieutenant said. "Your quarters are located right here, closest to the mess, as are Major Hayden's on the left side."

I nodded. "All right. Thank you again, Lieutenant. I think I'll take it from here and start to get things organized."

"Yes, ma'am. If you or Major Hayden have any further questions, feel free to COM me until the commander is ready to receive you."

"We'll do that."

As soon as she was out of sight, and I'd sent my security detail off to their own assigned quarters, I found myself standing there alone with my XO. We exchanged a glance.

"Awfully friendly these guys, huh?" Captain Harris remarked.

I let out a sigh. "Yeah, but they're not the ones to worry about. These are our own guys. It's whatever's beyond these walls that I'm curious to see."

"Roger that."

Dropping my pack next to my feet for a moment, I folded my arms across my chest and paused, looking up at the trees all around. "Makes me wonder how bad things've gotten around here that they're this happy to see us, though. Technically, we're just engineers. Here to help rebuild, and for backup only. It's Hayden's battalion that's here for the brunt of the work if things go south."

#### 19. Chapter 18: Meet and Greet

##### \*\*Chapter Eighteen: Meet and Greet\*\*

"Hey, Cooper, check it out. It's not boiling, freezing, snowing, raining, or storming, but actually sunny and warm." My best friend grinned at me. "I think we've finally landed the elusive perfect-weather post."

I snorted as I folded my arms across my chest. "Yeah, great. Only took us ten years of being in the Corps to find it."

"Speak for yourself. It's been fifteen for me." Hayden's grin widened. "I guess sooner or later, you eventually hit the jackpot."

I let out a sigh, my own smile fading. "I'd feel a lot better about the weather if there weren't so much anxious handwringing going around in this place."

"If I remember right, you did plenty of that yourself before we got here."

"Yep. And it looks like it was probably warranted." I turned to face him. "Did you see the buzz around here when we came rolling in? It was like we brought in a huge vat of water to a thirsty desert."

My friend laughed. "That's one way of putting it."

Hayden and I were standing just outside the commander's office now, taking in the last rays of afternoon sunlight that bled through the tall trees with our sunglasses on. We'd already made sure both our respective battalions were assigned quarters and squared away, and we'd each had plenty of time to stow our own gear as well while we'd waited for the outpost commander to call us in. I wondered what the urgent matter had been that'd delayed the briefing, but knew we were sure to find out shortly.

We stood there dressed down in just our battledress uniforms with our sleeves rolled up. In an effort to look as docile as possible to any local observers, the commander's young aide had encouraged us to shed our armor and helmets, though I'd put my foot down at parting with my weapon holster. I'd agreed to carrying my sidearm unloaded for the time being, but I'd never go without in case we got in a pinch.

"Majors Hayden, Cooper," the aide said then, finally stepping out of the room. "Colonel Dwight will see you now."

"Thanks," Oliver replied.

I gave the lieutenant a nod of acknowledgment myself, and then we filed into the office. Both of us quickly came to attention in front of the colonel's desk and saluted.

"Sir, Majors Hayden and Cooper, reporting as ordered," I said.

The colonel, who was busy puffing on a thick cigar behind a dense stack of papers and two datapads, motioned for us to relax. "At ease, Marines. You'll find in time that I'm not so interested in formalities around here. What I expect are results."

"Sir," Hayden and I replied.

Colonel Dwight released a sigh. "But I can't get that from you unless you know what you're up against, am I right? So have a seat, both of you. We'll get you up to speed."

My friend and I did as ordered and sat in the two chairs in front of the colonel's desk. Much to my surprise, the commander immediately pulled out a small bottle of amber liquid from underneath and placed it on the table.

"Scotch?"

Oliver and I exchanged a quick glance, then looked back to the colonel with faint smiles on our faces.

"Yes, sir," we answered in unison.

The colonel smiled as well. "Things always go down better with a drink, I find," he said as his aide poured each of us two fingers of the alcohol. "Not too much, but just enough to quell the apprehension." He looked us in the eyes. "I'll admit, it's a tough spot you're jumping into right now. I'm not sure how much you were told before you made the trip out, but we haven't been faring as well as we used to around here. There've always been threats and complaints and even some verbal fighting between us and the locals, but now, it's finally escalated." He paused to take a sip, then put his glass down again. "Two Marines were killed just last night from sniper fire. We're not sure who it is yet, but we do know some segment of the local population is involved. And as soon as those rebel sons a bitches took out two of my Marines, that was it. No more playing nice."

Suddenly the alcohol burned in my throat, and not just by its nature. Though I regretted the loss of two of our own, the last thing I wanted was a commander hellbent on blind vengeance, when all I wanted

was to wrap this up as quickly and peacefully as possible so I could go home. I risked opening my mouth to speak. "Sir, if I may."

"Go ahead, Major."

I glanced down at the cup in my hand. "Do we know for sure it was the locals, sir? Is it possible there are Jackal pirates in the area with captured human weaponry that just don't like our presence here?"

He looked at me like I was demented. "Absolutely not. Why would they attack a fortified human outpost?"

I tried to shrug off the sudden hostility and forged ahead. This was important. "Maybe because they don't want us on Khan, either, sir? I suspect any UNSC troops they've encountered - here or elsewhere - have generally tried to disrupt their trafficking business. And it's usually the UNSC who does that, since the rebels are more than happy to trade." I paused to take a drink. "If we're dead, we can't stop them, or get in their way. And everyone knows Jackals are good sharpshooters."

For a moment, it looked like Colonel Dwight was actually considering what I'd said. I hoped he would. If we thought the locals didn't like our mere \_presence\_ here, they'd definitely start to take up arms against us if we began shooting at them with no apparent cause - assuming they weren't the perpetrators. As far as I could tell, there was something to be gained here for the Jackal traders as well if they'd contrived a plan to get the UNSC troops and the locals to think one was attacking the other. I didn't think my idea was that far-fetched, and I was hoping the outpost commander would see that.

When he said nothing in reply, I continued. "My point is, sir, I think we should eliminate all the possibilities before we point our fingers to the locals as the problem. We shouldn't sit here and do nothing about our Marines being attacked, but we shouldn't just look to the easy answer without knowing for sure, either. Sir. There's too much at stake here for that."

I noticed my friend shift uncomfortably in his seat. He was going to stay out of this until he knew how the commander felt about it. I didn't exactly blame him, but I wasn't going to keep what was on my mind to myself. I'd seen enough of war the last several years to not want to start a new one so soon without evidence. And I knew that what we did here on Khan could be the catalyst for the rest of the disgruntled Outer Colony worlds if we did this the wrong way.

Finally, the colonel ran a hand over his face and sighed. "Very well. You have a point, Major. In fact, the reason I wasn't able to receive you two right away when you arrived was because I was meeting with the town mayor. I let him know about what happened last night, and that I was extremely upset that he'd done nothing to prevent it." he took another sip. "I thought he was pulling my leg when he said none of his people were involved, but maybe he was actually telling the truth. I'll have my spook look into it. See what he turns up."

While I was busy inwardly breathing a sigh of relief, Hayden suddenly perked up and asked, "There's a spook here, too, sir?"

Colonel Dwight chuckled, but it was more of a disgusted one. "You know ONI has its paws in everything, Major - whether we know about it or not. But this kid's actually proved useful to us at least. The intel he gathers is one of the few reasons we're not knee-deep in rebel blood right now."

With such an impulsive outpost commander, I wasn't surprised.

"Anyway," the colonel continued, "you'll be meeting him eventually as well. He's out on assignment at the moment, but I'll be sure to get the message across to him to find out exactly where those shots came from - and who's really targeting us." He smiled sadly. "Some times we live in now, huh? And we thought the war with the Flood and the Covenant was bad."

"Yes, sir," Hayden and I responded.

"All right. Well, now that you have a better idea of the situation, it's time to get to work, Majors." He looked over at my friend first. "Major Hayden, I'd like you and your Marines to lay low for a while, for the most part. I'll want one of your companies to help bolster our patrols and stand on guard duty, chosen at your discretion. Just enough show of force to deter the enemy, but not enough to scare the locals if they're not involved." He faced me next. "Major Cooper, I have something else in mind for you. Besides putting a smile on your face while you help the locals reconstruct the damage from the war, I want you to be our liaison from now on. That starts with meeting the mayor tonight."

\* \* \*

><p>I downed the rest of my scotch in one gulp before leaving the commander's office, then shot a glance at my best friend as we filed out.</p>

"Thanks for the backup in there," I commented dryly.

"I'm sorry, Cooper. I just don't like to get involved in the politics of it all. I'm here to take orders and do my job, whatever it may be, and that's it."

I looked over at him incredulously. "So you don't care that he was quite possibly about to shoot up a bunch of innocent civilians over what happened?"

"If it means stopping our Marines from dying, no," Hayden retorted. Then he sighed and ran a quick hand over his short brown hair. "Shit. That sounded bad. It's not what I meant. What I mean to say is, stop thinking with your heart and go with your gut instead, Natalie. You know I've spent most of the last four years here in the Outer Colonies fighting rebels, trying to put this fire out before it spreads. And I know you have no clue what it's like to have to fight fellow human beings, so I can excuse that. I'm just coming at this from a very different angle than you."

"Would you mind enlightening me then? Because it sounds like you're okay with this."

"I'm not okay with killing innocent civilians. What I'm trying to

make you realize is that not everyone in the outskirts is one. This is what they do, Cooper. They lie and deceive and pretend to be your friend, and then before you know it, they've got guns trained on you. Don't be so quick to think it's not the locals doing this. We're not just fighting aliens anymore, so you need to get that type of thinking out of your head. For your own sake."

I stopped walking then and frowned. "Oliver...what the hell happened out here that made you so damn cynical?"

"I killed my first rebel, Natalie," he said, stopping himself now to look me in the eyes as he answered. "Then another, and then another. I told you about this the night we met up for drinks back on Earth. Don't trust anyone who's not us. Things aren't the same as we left them after the war. And you need to start learning that."

\* \* \*

><p>I wished the commander had been more generous with his supply of booze, because I really could have used another shot or two right now. Or five. Since getting drunk while deployed wasn't an option, however, I settled for mindlessly checking my datapad for the twelfth time while I waited to meet the mayor. The nearby town of Redwood Falls sounded pleasant enough, but between my own worries about the mission and the talk I'd just had with Hayden, I was feeling more on edge than usual. It was all I could do to stop myself from patting my side to make sure my pistol was still there. Something about this place reeked of impending chaos.</p>

Finally, the man of the hour showed up. He looked to be a little over a decade older than me, maybe in his mid-forties, with salt-and-pepper hair and gray eyes. He had a meticulously groomed goatee and a charming smile that he flashed my way as he got closer. I was surprised by his vaguely Spanish accent when he spoke.

"Ah, excuse me, madam," he said, bowing slightly. "When they told me I was to meet a Major Cooper in charge of the newly arrived engineers, I thought it would be a man. I did not think it would be a lovely woman such as yourself. I am Mayor Javier Laraza, at your service."

Knowing what he was trying, I flashed my wedding ring at him before folding my arms across my chest. I wasn't fooled by his feigned charm, and I didn't want any of my body language indicating that his advances were somehow going to melt me into submission. Only one man did that for me, and he was currently still aboard the Suave Affair, high in orbit. "A very taken woman, sir. But we're not here to discuss aesthetics. Let's talk business, Mr. Laraza." I stuck out my hand. "I'm Major Natalie Cooper, commanding officer of the 8th Engineer Battalion, UNSC Marines."

"Cooper," the man repeated as we shook. Obviously my posture hadn't worked, since he continued along the same vein as before. "You appear young for the position. If I may ask, how old are you, Major?"

"Thirty, sir." I gave him a tight-lipped smile. "And if we're done charming the pants off one another, I'd really like to talk to you about why I'm here, and what myself and my engineers can do for the area."

His own grin disappeared. It seemed he'd finally realized I wasn't too young and naïve after all and actually knew what I was doing. His tone changed, too.

"Very well. Let us discuss just that, Major. If you would kindly step into my office, we can continue this inside."

Once we were seated, he gathered his hands in his lap and asked, "You're part of the promised UNSC aid convoy, are you not? Here to help us with the reconstruction?"

"Yes."

Javier was every bit as clever as I thought him to be. "Ah. Then why come here with two battalions of armed Marines, if it's only for help?" He looked me in the eyes. "You see our predicament, then? Why we do not find it easy to trust your word, especially given the way your commander spoke to me today?"

"I do, sir. But I promise, we're here to help."

He gestured to my sidearm holster. "Your chosen equipment tells me otherwise."

Beginning to grow frustrated, I pulled my pistol out and handed it to him grip-first. "Here. Take it if you want. It's unloaded."

Laraza raised an eyebrow. "Then what is the point of having it at all, Major?"

"Protection," I replied, holstering it again. "From the ex-Covenant. I hear they're still hovering around, harassing you guys - and us - on occasion. So I've got three clips of ammo on me, just in case. But I don't keep any rounds inside the chamber."

Despite what I'd just said, he continued to eye me suspiciously. "I still do not understand your intentions, Cooper."

I sighed. "The ammo's in my pouches. I don't need it loaded unless there's an alien attack." Right? was left unspoken.

The mayor stared at me a moment longer before finally nodding. "All right. In that case, I will show you the schematics your commander asked for."

"Please."

I watched for a minute as he got up to rummage through the drawers of his desk. Eventually, he produced several large rolls of paper and held them out for me to take. I snorted without thinking as I took them.

"These aren't schematics," I said before I could stop myself. "These are blueprints."

Obviously, I was still learning how to be diplomatic.

Javier smirked at me in response. "You'll find the Outer Colonies are a bit primitive in comparison to the riches of the Inner, Major

Cooper. Even more so now, after the war."

"I don't know, sir. Earth got hit hard. So did my home planet of Mars. No one escaped the war."

He was in my face so fast I had to pull back a bit, momentarily wondering if I was going to regret not having a loaded gun on me. He jabbed a finger at me.

"\_No one\_ got hit worse than us outliers, Major. No one. Do not forget that."

Taking another step back, I quickly brought my hands up in surrender, not wanting to get into an argument about that now. "All right. I'm sorry. Just tell me what you'd like done, Mr. Laraza, and my Marines and I will get started on it tomorrow."

\* \* \*

><p>By the time I made it back to my quarters once the meetings were over, it was pitch black around the forest. I looked down at my watch and noted that it was only 2000 hours, but I was beat. Too much had happened today already - and it was only my first six hours on-planet. It hadn't been physically exhausting, but definitely mentally grueling. I collapsed in my bunk without stopping by the mess hall first to eat a late dinner, then laid back as I pulled off my boots. I lay there a moment longer with my arms folded behind my head before I got up again and went to grab my datapad off the desk.</p>

What I was about to do wasn't strictly allowed during deployments, but at least for now, we weren't in combat yet, and Willis was directly above us in space. I initiated the call without another thought.

He answered on the third ring. It looked like he was in his bunk, too, in our quarters on the ship. He also looked sleepy, and his short, light brown hair was a little mussed. It made me sad I wasn't there to keep him company tonight. "Cooper?"

I smiled at him in the video link. "Yeah, it's me. Did I wake you?"

"Um...yeah."

"Sorry."

"Don't worry about it." He let out a yawn. "Had the day shift today just after you left, so I knocked out early. What's going on? Did you make it dirtside?"

"I did. I'm fine, and everyone else made it safe, too. Nothing to report just yet."

"That's good," he replied. Then his sleep-muddled brain seemed to catch up with what I'd said. "Wait. Nothing 'just yet'?"

I frowned. "That's the best way to describe it. There's some odd stuff going on around here...I guess I'd say I'm getting a weird vibe from everyone. There's been some attacks, but we're not sure who

they're coming from yet, and people on both sides are a little on edge. But we're looking into it."

"Understandable. You're okay though? Your Marines? Hayden?"

"We're all good, like I said. The latest attack was last night before we got here, and nothing's happened so far for us."

"All right. Well, be careful down there." He grinned faintly. "I already miss you, Coop."

"Me, too. I love you, Will."

"I love you, too. Talk to you tomorrow?"

"I'm not sure if I'll have time. We're starting with the reconstruction, so it'll probably be a long day. I'll try to call you again within the next few days, though, okay?"

"'Kay."

"See you later."

"Bye."

I was left with that pitiful ache in my chest when I hung up. I'd already gone almost a whole month without seeing my kids, but this was the first night I was without them and Willis. That, coupled with all I'd seen and dealt with today, put me in a somber mood.

Sighing as I placed my datapad on the nightstand beside me, I turned out the lights then and tried to go to sleep.

## 20. Chapter 19: Two Ways To Go

\*\*Chapter Nineteen: Two Ways To Go\*\*

I woke up the next morning to someone pounding on the door to my quarters in the outpost. Inhaling sharply as I awoke, I found myself blinking down at my pillow, lying on my stomach underneath the covers. Needless to say, I definitely wasn't ready for company yet.

Crap, I thought to myself. Hope it's not the colonel. I didn't even know what time it was. I quickly groped around the nightstand for my watch.

"Wake up!" a male voice shouted. I recognized it as Hayden's. "Rise and shine, Cooper! Up and at 'em!"

"Urmph," was all I managed to reply at first. Still not getting up yet, I pulled my other arm out from beneath my pillow and ran it across my face before trying again for coherency. "Why? What time is it? What's going on?"

"0530. Nothing's happening yet, but you do want to be awake before your battalion, right?"

After hearing how early it was - and that there was no impending danger - I shoved my face back in my pillow. "No."

My best friend burst in the room uninvited then, surprising me - though from the sound of his voice, it sounded like he remained by the doorway as he spoke.

"Well, regardless, you still have to get up, Major," he said. I heard the grin in his voice as he added, "Come on. This is what they pay us the big bucks for."

"I can't, Oliver. Not with you here. I'm just in my T-shirt and underwear under this."

"Ah. In that case, I'll leave you to it. I don't want your flyboy hubby breaking my jaw when we get back to the ship."

I answered with something between a snort and a chuckle. "That he would."

The door creaked open then as Major Hayden turned to leave. But I didn't hear him step out just yet.

"Hey, Natalie?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry about yesterday, okay? Really." His serious tone quickly switched back to his usual joking one. "Can we kiss and make up now?"

I responded with another snort. "We can be friends again, sure. Now get out."

\* \* \*

><p>When I was presentable - dressed in my uniform with my weapon holster around my hip and my hair put up per regulations - I finally stepped out of my quarters. It was another gorgeous, mild, sunny day on Khan, even this early in the morning. I frowned as I put on my sunglasses against the rays sneaking in between the trees. I was starting to think of that as an omen. I'd never been posted in a place with weather this nice before.</p>

After grabbing a quick breakfast and some coffee in the mess, I returned outside to find Hayden already making the rounds, checking to see that the company he'd assigned to perimeter and patrol duty was doing its job. It wasn't quite 0600 hours yet, the time I'd designated for my Marines to be ready to head out today, so I decided to go bug my friend for a few minutes.

Climbing up onto the observation platforms surrounding the outpost - manned by a number of fully armed and armored Marines - I walked up beside Hayden and pointed to a few civilians in the distance who were starting out their day early.

"You know, if you want things to go more smoothly, you should consider making friendly with the locals," I said to him.

Oliver turned to face me and grinned as he wagged his eyebrows. "How

friendly?"

I laughed and gave him a look. "Not that friendly, but they're a little more cautious of you, being infantry."

"Makes sense."

"I'm serious. You might want to go try to change their minds before this turns into a royal clusterfuck for all of us."

My best friend snorted. "You mean more than it already is?" He paused for a minute, and then his tone went quiet and serious. "What if it is them that's attacking us, Cooper?"

I let out a sigh. "Then we do what we have to to protect ourselves. Until then, it doesn't hurt to calm their fears. In fact, if it's not them, it can only help things."

"Yeah. Maybe."

Major Hayden didn't say anything for a while after that. We both stood there for a moment watching the civvies walk by. Finally, he said, "What do you think Dean would've thought about this place if he were here?"

"With that flaming mop of hair of his?" I chuckled. "He would've been the first to go, definitely. And forget about any covert ops."

"Heh. I miss that red-headed bastard. I still haven't forgiven him for ditching us like that."

"Me, either," I replied, swallowing hard on the pain the memory brought. "I miss Lewis a lot, too."

"Fuck." Hayden ran a hand across his face. "Sorry I brought it up. Let's just not talk about him anymore. Four years later and I still feel like telling him about stuff sometimes before I remember he's gone."

"Same here." Looking out in the distance, I suddenly had an idea. "Hey, Oliver?"

"Yeah?"

"Mind if I go bother one of your guys for a sec?"

"Sure thing. What are you - "

"Just want to take a look at something real quick."

Stepping off to the side, I moved over to the nearest Marine hefting a 99-S5 sniper rifle and tapped him on the shoulder. "Lance Corporal?"

He glanced up from his crouched position. "Major?"

"Let me see your weapon, Marine."

"Yes, ma'am."

The lance corporal handed me the gun without another word and I took it carefully in my hands, knowing that unlike my sidearm, this was fully loaded and ready to fire at a moment's notice.

I wasn't exactly sure what it was I was hoping to find - definitive evidence on our targets, I supposed, though I knew the chances of that were remote. If none of the Marines manning the perimeter twenty-four hours a day were able to spot anything, the odds that I somehow would were nil. Still, I felt compelled to try.

Looking through the scope of the sniper rifle, I suddenly realized how hard it was to see much of anything between the trees. The forest surrounding Outpost Columbia was thick - no doubt one of the reasons the outpost had been established here to begin with. It was hard to attack a fortified position that you couldn't see, and even harder to gain any intel aerially when the trees' canopies were so high up they obscured everything. Yet still, something out there had found a way to attack us, despite all the natural cover.

As Hayden had pointed out to me many times, I'd never fought a neo-rebel before. I didn't know how they operated, beyond what little I'd been told, and I wasn't really sure what the full extent of their capabilities were. But I did know that whatever it was, it had to have had a tough time sniping through the redwoods. So in my own mind, all signs pointed to alien activity.

The best-trained snipers outside the UNSC that I knew of were Jackals. I'd learned that during the war.

After returning the lance corporal's rifle to him, I walked back over to Hayden. He had a questioning look on his face.

"So? What'd you find?"

"Nothing yet," I answered. "But I want your opinion on something."

"Shoot."

I gestured at the forest around us. "Would a reb - or any disgruntled local, for that matter - be able to shoot through all this? And not miss their mark even once? Just two clean hits right off the bat like that?"

Hayden shrugged. "I've seen stranger. But now that you mention it...they'd have to be damn good to pull that off."

"Too good, I think." I sighed again as I turned to go gather up my own battalion. "Watch yourself out here, Hayden."

"You, too, Cooper. You're the one who gets to be down there with the rabble."

\* \* \*

><p>Several hours later, I was with my own Marines at our first designated construction site - what used to be Redwood Falls' expansive MagLev train station, a central hub for travel across the southern part of planet that had been leveled during the war. Besides being such a vital part of the local transportation system, it'd also

served as the area's main way to both import and export goods throughout Khan, since there was no nearby seaport or spaceport. If the area had any hope of boosting its economy and becoming self-sufficient again without the UNSC's help, it needed its MagLev station rebuilt. The mayor had flagged this project as a high priority yesterday, so I'd decided this was what my engineers and I would tackle first.<p>

As usual, the work was grueling and physically demanding, but all of us - including myself - had become used to it thanks to having spent the last few years since the end of the war helping to rebuild on Earth. In comparison to the number of tasks we'd had there and the extent of the devastation, this, so far, was fairly easy and straightforward work. Despite what Javier Laraza thought, humanity's homeworld had been positively sacked in the last year of the fight against the Covenant. This was much simpler - excluding the fact that we currently had an endless list of possible enemies here.

A few of the locals had paused and gathered to watch for a time, but no one had tried to bother us. Most appeared thankful that something was finally being done about the place. It'd definitely looked the worse for wear when we'd first gotten here to check out the site this morning, but I was confident we'd get it back up to shipshape within the next several weeks.

In the meantime, though, I kept these thoughts in the back of my mind as I went around to make sure everyone was still on their task. We'd stopped for a quick lunch break of MREs a short while ago, and I'd taken the opportunity to talk with my company commanders as well as a few of the enlisted Marines themselves - to see how the work was going, how they were doing, and if they'd seen anything suspicious so far. It seemed everything was just fine for now. But I knew how fast that could change.

I came to a halt then near one of the Warthogs we'd brought in with us, full to the brim with supplies, and pulled out the blueprints the mayor had given me again, spreading them out on the hood of the vehicle. There were several different sets for this assignment - originals from when the station had first been built, and newer ones for the reconstruction. There were a few aesthetic enhancements included in the latter, as well as a few sections of rail and some of the terminals that Laraza had thought needed expansion. I was busy studying each, as I'd already done a number of times since this morning, when my XO approached.

"Major."

"Shawn," I acknowledged. "How's the battalion doing?"

"A through D Companies working hard, ma'am. Not much else to tell you." He paused to lean over my shoulder for a minute before stepping beside me. "Are these blueprints?"

I chuckled. "Yup. But don't mention that to the mayor. He gets real touchy about his old tech. Or I guess I should say lack thereof."

"No kidding. He a mean guy? Mid-life crisis or something?"

"Something like that. Gave me a hard time about it when we met yesterday. Made it sound like the Outer Colonies had barely come out of the Covie-and-Flood-induced holocaust while we were busy living it up on Earth with our 'riches'."

Captain Harris scoffed. "That may have been true at the start of the war thirty-two years ago. Not so much the case anymore by the end of it."

"Don't I know it. I was just - "

An explosion suddenly rocked the ground beneath us, sending Harris and I both on our asses in the red dirt. Thankfully, the two of us were wearing our helmets at the construction site, so we weren't too affected by the impact. But I was definitely worried about my Marines.

The captain stood first and extended his hand to help me up. "What the hell was that?"

"I don't know," I answered as I took it. As soon as Harris had hauled me back to my feet, I opened up a battalion-wide channel. "Marines, this is Major Cooper. Report."

"There was an explosive hidden in the rubble, ma'am," one of my company commanders, Captain Kelson, replied. "It detonated as we were clearing out the debris. We didn't know what it was until it went off."

"\_Dammit\_. Casualties?"

"One dead, three wounded, ma'am."

I switched channels to Doc Reynolds, still reeling from the news. "Doc, you're up!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Kelson?"

"Major?"

"Medic's on his way. How bad are the three wounded?"

"One's got a shrapnel wound, ma'am, not life-threatening. The others just have cuts and burns from getting too close."

"All right. Seal off that section of the rubble for now and make sure no one else goes near it. I want a full sweep of the rest of the site before we continue. We can't have this happen again, understood?"

"Yes, ma'am. Got it."

Against my instincts, I pulled off my helmet then and ran a quick hand through my hair. This was just about the worst way to start things off. Now one of my Marines was dead, and we had to worry about hidden dangers among the debris on top of everything else. I cursed myself for not thinking of doing a sweep for ordnance in the first place.

I wondered why there'd been an explosive there to begin with, though.

Turning to my XO again as I shoved my helmet back on, I said, "Harris?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Get me Colonel Dwight on the line. I want to speak with Mayor Laraza. Now."

## 21. Chapter 20: Blast From the Past

\*\*Chapter Twenty: Blast From the Past\*\*

I was furious when I finally got an audience with Redwood Falls' mayor a half hour later. With one of my own Marines now dead because of some stupid mistake - either because it was something we hadn't been warned about, or because the explosive had been planted there by someone on purpose - my attitude was very much changed. I was prepared to hear the mayor out, but at the same time, I vowed that this would not happen again. And I'd make sure he knew that as well.

"Major Cooper?" his secretary said. "Mayor Laraza will see you now."

Stepping inside his office without a word, I turned on the mayor as soon as the door shut behind me. "Do you know what the fuck just happened?"

Laraza immediately held his hands up from behind his desk to try to placate me. "Major, please. I am sure that whatever has occurred, we can - "

I shook my head at him, standing right in front of the table now, gripping my helmet in one hand. "You don't get it, do you? One of my men is dead, Mr. Laraza. D-E-A-D. Dead. I saw his body. Or rather, what was left of it." I gave him a look of pointed disgust. "Have you ever seen what a close detonation does to a person, Mayor? Because I saw damn plenty during the war, and unpleasant doesn't even begin to describe it."

"Major...Cooper, is it? Please, have a seat, and we can discuss this in a more civilized manner."

"No," I replied firmly as I leaned forward. "I want an answer. Now. Why the hell is there concealed ordnance on our build site, and why were we not forewarned about this? I accept that there's inherent risks in any construction job, but that certainly does not include bombs."

It was the mayor's turn to fix a hard stare at me now. "You were not warned, Major, because I did not know. No one did. How could we? These places I have asked you to help us rebuild have not been touched for four years. Some longer. We did not have the resources ourselves to fix these things on our own."

"Yeah, I know that," I snapped. "That's why we're here. What about the ordnance?"

He shrugged very carefully. "Possibly left over from when the Covenant demolished the place. Maybe whatever you happened to have found simply did not go off then and was instead triggered now by all the movement."

"These weren't old Covenant explosives, Mayor. They were human tech."

"Then perhaps the Jackals got a hold of it and planted them there. Either way, I can assure you it is not us."

That was definitely a possibility, I had to give him that. Yet still, if there was any chance at all of foul play here, I wanted to make it clear that it would not be tolerated. "I really hope that's true, sir. Because in case you ever start to forget, Mr. Laraza, we're the ones helping to rebuild your entire infrastructure single-handedly. Us, the UNSC. The nasty, intrusive government you all seem to hate so damn much."

To his credit, the mayor at least had the decency to look stunned by the jab. "I hate no one, Major. Least of all those who have so kindly come to our aid. I assure you, I am nothing but appreciative for the hard work you have agreed to perform here on Khan for us. We - "

I was suddenly tired of this. I cut him off. "You know what? Spare me. Let me just say that I am the only one willing to give you the benefit of the doubt right now. But if one more Marine gets killed - my own, or any others - then that is it. When my men and women are endangered, that's where I draw the line." I straightened as I turned to go. "Tread lightly, sir. And don't fuck this up."

\* \* \*

><p>Later in the afternoon, when I'd returned to the MagLev train station site to check on how things were progressing, I found that the ordnance sweep I'd ordered done had recovered nothing else so far. Upon hearing the news, I started to wonder if I'd been a bit too harsh with the mayor earlier - but in the end, I decided that what had happened here had warranted it. I had one dead Marine and three injured from a blast. It was not acceptable. Not like this, and especially not if it could have been prevented.</p>

Seeing that things were under control with Captain Harris at the helm, I left the site again to return to the outpost - this time, to check up on the wounded. Columbia's medical wing was a modest one, like the rest of the place, but it was well-stocked now since our arrival, and there were no Marines inside save for the ones who'd been hurt today. So it was easy to find them - and so was Doc Reynolds.

I took a moment to speak to the two men with minor injuries, then made my way to the back where Reynolds was busy treating the Marine with the shrapnel wound.

"Hey, Doc," I said by way of greeting.

The medic glanced up from checking the young Marine's vitals on his

datapad. "Major Cooper, ma'am. Good to see you. What are you doing here?"

"Wanted to stop by real quick to see how everyone was doing." I nodded to the Marine, PFC Daniel Neeson, who was sitting up now in his cot with a bandaged forearm. "How's the arm, Private?"

He looked surprised I was even addressing him, but also gratified. "I'm...okay now, ma'am. Hurt like a mother when I got stuck, but Doc here...he patched me up pretty good. Got some morphine, too, ma'am. I feel fine now."

"Glad to hear it."

Reynolds looked up at me again. "The piece went into his left brachioradialis, Major. It'll be hard for him to flex his arm for a while. Won't be able to bend it from the elbow, either, till that torn muscle heals up."

"We'll put you on limited duty then, Marine. Just until you can move that arm again."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you. And thanks for coming by to see me."

I gave him a faint smile of encouragement. "No problem, Private."

\* \* \*

><p>The remainder of the day passed quickly at the site. By the time I got back, the ordnance sweep was complete, and work resumed. For today - and probably most of tomorrow, too - that included clearing more debris, but I thought we'd be far enough along by late the next day to start laying down a new foundation. After taking a quick lukewarm shower once we got back to the outpost, I stopped by the mess again to eat dinner. Then, it was time for a briefing with my company commanders to discuss the day's events, and how we'd proceed from here.</p>

It was 2134 hours when I finally got to my quarters. Surprisingly, even after everything that had happened, I didn't really feel all that tired yet. I thought about looking through the blueprints again or checking up on some battalion items, but after a while, I found I just couldn't concentrate. I set the papers and my datapad aside and turned out the lights.

I lay awake in my bunk for a long time, wondering what it was that I was missing. Some things pointed to the Jackals being the problem here on Khan, others more clearly to the locals - and some part of me still refused to believe it was the people. Maybe I just didn't want it to be them, like Hayden had implied yesterday. I really didn't know.

Whatever it truly was, I knew I probably wouldn't be able to tell for sure until something else happened. And I dreaded that.

\* \* \*

><p>I didn't remember drifting off to sleep. When I woke up, startled, I wasn't even under the covers or undressed. The only things missing from my person were my boots and my weapon holster,

but I was still wearing my battledress uniform. For a moment I tried to recall what I'd been doing before falling asleep as I rubbed my eyes. But before the memory came back, I heard the nearby sound.<p>

Gunfire.

I was on my feet in an instant, alert and heart hammering inside my chest as I tugged on my boots fast. This was it. I felt it and I knew it in my gut. This was the last straw we'd been waiting for - something to show us what the real threat was out here. I still didn't know yet whether the gunfire was our own or from any locals, though. I scrambled to pull on the rest of my gear so I could jam outside to see.

My aide, Staff Sergeant Joshua Porter, happened to be right outside my door when I rushed out.

"Major Cooper? Jesus, I - "

Wearing all my armor for the first time since landing, with a fully loaded DMR in my hands, I interrupted and said, "Porter. Focus. Just tell me what's going on. Who's attacking us?"

"It's the rebels, ma'am."

"You're sure?"

"Positive, ma'am. Major Hayden announced it on the general COM freq five minutes ago."

"\_Shit\_."

"Ma'am?"

I gripped my rifle tighter, stifling the impulse to rush headlong into the skirmish myself. "Where's Hayden now, Staff?"

"I don't know, Major. Probably close to the fight. The rebs attacked our roving patrol first, then we caught 'em trying to get inside the outpost."

"How many?"

"Not sure, ma'am. It's got to be a small unit, maybe a squad or so. They weren't attempting to assault us head-on."

"All right. Josh, I want you to stop whatever you're doing and go make the rounds. Anybody still asleep in either barracks, wake them the hell up and get everyone out here. Now. Regardless of enemy presence, we need a show of force."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Send me updates through the COM if anything else happens in this part of the outpost. In the meantime, I'm going to go see what we're up against."

"Major, with all due respect, I advise - "

"Forget it, Josh. I'm heading out. Let Captain Harris know if you find him."

Porter released a sigh. "I will, Major."

"Okay." I slapped him once on the shoulder. "Good luck."

As I'd always done in the past, I sprinted towards the sound of the fighting. Yet unlike the other times, I knew this wasn't going to be to keep any extraterrestrial beings at bay. This time, it was fellow human beings. People. Though the idea still disgusted me on many levels, I hoped I wouldn't choke.

When I got to the main entrance of the outpost, just below the observation platforms Oliver and I had stood on this morning, I saw that Staff Sergeant Porter had been right. There was a group of Marines already engaged in a fierce firefight with a number of crouched figures in the dark. Hidden amongst the trees and other greenery, the rebels were hard to spot, but as soon as I flipped on the night vision in my HUD, I could see it all clear as day. I watched long enough to see one of the enemy fighters get tagged in the chest, and then I was on the move again myself, quickly making my way to a better location to take cover.

Bullets suddenly flew past my head in the dark. It was a sensation I'd only felt when fighting human Flood forms before - not real humans. It was new and different and strange, yet I didn't stop to rattle off a returning burst of fire. I kept going until I'd reached the rear of the forward-most line of the skirmish, then crouched behind Hayden's Marines. I would've liked to have been at the forefront, but knew I shouldn't risk it.

From behind a large red tree trunk, painted green like the rest of the forest in the cool night through my night vision, I tapped my HUD to zoom in using my weapon's 3x scope. After sweeping the gun slowly from side to side, I found a target, outlined in white through the DMR's targeting reticule. My finger was inside the trigger guard, ready to fire, but I didn't. I watched the rebel move and look down his own sights, but the aversion to inflicting harm on my own was strong.

\_He's aiming at Hayden's Marines,\_ a part of my mind told me. \_Maybe even at Oliver himself. Do you want to find out your best friend died because you couldn't pull the trigger?\_

I was still trying to psyche myself up when something jarring barreled into me. My helmet flew off from the impact, and I suddenly found myself in a scuffle with someone. A rebel. Before I could react, the young man punched me hard in the face, eliciting a loud, guttural groan from me. Pain spiked through my nose, and I felt blood starting to pour from it.

I found I couldn't breathe through my nose anymore, but right now not even oxygen intake was my primary concern. I needed this reb off me. I needed to knock him out.

I could've pulled one of my combat knives on him, but I was afraid of killing him. Using my gun was out of the question, too; I couldn't take out my pistol in time, and my DMR was somewhere beside us on the forest floor, no longer in my possession. So instead, I shoved my

left hand in his face while I brought my right up and hit him back.

The young reb grunted, momentarily pushed back from the punch, and that was all the opening I needed. I'd trained in hand-to-hand combat situations the whole ten years I'd been a Marine, and tested my skills numerous times in real fights against the Covenant - and the Flood. A person seemed like little in comparison.

I threw him off me easily after that and quickly gained the upper hand when I punched him again, this time on the side of his head. He reeled from the blow, and that's how I was finally able to pin him down. Straddling his chest now, I pulled my arm back to give him the K.O. when I stopped.

Blinking to make sure I was seeing straight, and breathing hard through my mouth since blood continued to fall in gobs from my nose, I sat there in a daze for the longest of seconds. He was supposed to be dead. But I realized it fit. It all fit. The rebel's young age, his short, light brown hair, even the deep brown eyes he looked up at me in frozen confusion with. All of it finally forced me to relent. And then the question came out.

"Matthew?"

I watched as the kid tried to squint at me in the dark, his lip split and bleeding from where I'd hit him - and suddenly, there was a flash of recognition in his eyes, too.

"Natalie?"

That was as far as we were able to get with the introductions. Or reintroduction, as it were. I heard a pair of heavy boots pounding the dirt then - a figure on approach. I turned and saw it was Doc Reynolds, come to see what a mess I'd made of myself this time. Ignoring the reb, he came to a halt a few feet away and gave me an incredulous stare.

"Ma'am? What are you waiting for? Capture him."

I glanced down at the kid as I shook my head. "No. Treat him, Doc."

Reynolds almost scoffed. "I'll treat you, Major. Not that."

"I said treat him," I repeated firmly. "That's an order. And make sure he gets fixed up before I do. He's my brother-in-law."

## 22. Chapter 21: Relative Location

\*\*Chapter Twenty-One: Relative Location\*\*

The skirmish with the rebels was over almost as quickly as it'd begun - once discovered, the small enemy force didn't have a chance against our heavily manned and fortified Marine outpost, and most of the rebs ended up dispersing and retreating back into the trees. Except for the dead ones. Thankfully, our own Marines had made it through unscathed with no casualties.

I got the news as I sat inside Outpost Columbia's medical wing beside my brother-in-law, tipping my head back as small pieces of gauze were stuffed up my nostrils to stop the bleeding. Turned out Matthew was quite the slugger; he'd given me a broken nose.

"Am I really supposed to go around like this now?" I asked Doc Reynolds while he finished up. "There goes my credibility."

Reynolds chuckled. "Nah. Makes you look tough, Major. The Marines like to see one of the senior officers getting into the thick of it with them." He met my eyes then. "You always did that in the past with Bravo Company."

I almost snorted before I realized how much pain that would put me through. I stopped myself just in time as I scratched at the dried blood that had spilled down my neck and chin, staining part of the collar of my T-shirt. "I remember, Doc. That's how I got all those Purple Hearts."

The medic laughed this time. "You've definitely been a frequent flyer of the medical tent express over the years, ma'am." Wrapping up his work, he checked my vitals as well as Matthew's one last time, then made for the door. "Well, that's about all I can do for you two. At most I can give you some aspirin later if the pain gets bad. Otherwise, time will do the rest."

"Thanks, Doc," I said.

"My pleasure, Major." He snuck a look over at Matthew. "I'll leave you to it."

The room went terribly quiet as soon as Reynolds took his leave. But I was determined to break it. The young nineteen-year-old rebel sitting next to me was a kid I hadn't seen in twelve years, someone everyone had thought legitimately dead. A conversation had to be had now. And I think he realized it, too.

Much to my surprise, Matthew beat me to the punch.

"Brother-in-law, huh?" he said to me in a low voice. "So you married my older brother after all."

"Yeah, I did. Ten years ago now. The same day we graduated from the Naval Academy together."

"That explains the uniform. My brother a Marine, too?"

"Yup. A pilot."

"You didn't change your last name to ours, though. You're still Cooper."

"That's right."

Matthew nodded in response but didn't say anything for a while, probably taking time to digest the information. It felt strange staring at him now, trying to reconcile what he'd looked like as a little boy of seven with freckles and dimples and the same color hair and eyes, but in the body of a young man now, all grown up.

Finally, he rubbed his hands together in front of him. "I'm sorry about your nose, Nat."

"I'm sorry about your lip, kiddo."

He glanced over at me, saw the faint grin on my face, and he smiled a little, too. But it was gone again in a flash.

"So am I your prisoner now?"

"No."

"Am I free to go then?"

"No."

"Then what am I doing here?"

I let out a rough sigh as I pinched the bridge of my nose. It was still throbbing like crazy. Not as much as my head at the moment, though. This was a lot to take in. "I don't know yet, to be honest. Christ, we thought you were dead, Matt. All of us, all these years. We even went to your funeral back home. Will and I named our oldest son after you. We just reversed your first and middle name when he was born."

Matthew blinked. "Wow. I have a nephew?"

"Two nephews," I corrected. "And a niece."

"So I'm an uncle, huh? Cool." He paused, then asked, "Are they all yours and Will's? Or did Jamie have a kid, too?"

"Nope. All mine and Will's."

He smirked. "Damn. You guys've been busy."

I immediately shot him a look. "Don't go there."

"Sorry." He rubbed his hands together again. "How old are they?"

"Gabriel is seven, and Olivia and Liam are three," I answered. I hesitated for a moment, then added, "We had a fourth baby, before the twins, but the kid didn't make it."

"Shit. I'm really sorry, Nat. Boy or a girl?"

My throat started to constrict, so I talked fast. "We don't know. I was only three months pregnant when -" Finally, I shook my head. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay. I guess that's fair." Running a hand over his short, cropped hair, he said, "You didn't have to bring it up at all if you didn't want to, you know."

I smiled sadly. "No, I do. Because there's something you need to understand." I looked him in the eyes then, made sure he was listening. "I don't know what you intend to say to everyone else, or what you're thinking of doing about all this. But your mother needs

to know you're alive, Matt. I know what it's like to lose a child. It tears out your insides and guts you like you wouldn't believe. Takes the air out of your lungs and crushes your heart. It's the worst kind of pain you can imagine. And she's been feeling that for more than a decade."

The words seemed to have the desired effect at first. Matthew's face screwed up for a minute and he glanced down at his boots. He was a tough kid though, and his eyes were dry when he looked up again. "I can't."

"Why not?" I asked. "Matthew, what - "

"Can we not do this tonight, please? I have my reasons. Just...trust me."

"This isn't about trust. This is about telling your family you're alive. Do you know how huge that is to us? What everyone went through twelve years ago? And even today?" My tone had gradually gotten harder without meaning to, and I leaned forward now, pressing. "What are you even doing here, Matt?"

"I said we'll talk tomorrow, okay? I really don't feel like doing this right now. I need some...time. To figure this shit out."

I was angry now, because it seemed like everything I'd said wasn't making its way into Matthew's head. "Figure out \_what\_? At the very least, your brother needs to know about this."

"He's here?"

"Yes. Not here on the ground, but up in orbit on our ship."

Matthew's face went white. "He can't know I'm on Khan, Nat. You can't say a word, all right?"

"Why - "

"He won't want to see me."

I was getting very close to being exasperated now. "\_What are you talking about?\_" I said. "You don't know the hell Willis went through all these years thinking you were dead - what your whole family went through. They'd die for a chance to see you again."

My brother-in-law licked his lips, wincing a bit as he did so over the wound. Then he replied somberly, "I'm not the little kid he remembers anymore, Natalie. I'm a man now. Grew up here and live here, and I'm a dirty fucking rebel." He met my eyes again. "The Matthew you and my brother and my sister and my parents knew is gone. That's why they can't know."

I let out another sigh and ran a hand through my hair. This wasn't going to be settled tonight. "Listen. You have your opinion, and I have mine. Sleep on it. You can stay in a cot in the medical wing for tonight, and I'll make sure no one bothers you. But tomorrow morning, we're having this talk again. You need to tell your family you're alive, one way or another. They've all suffered way too damn much to be kept in the dark. And I won't lie to my husband. Not about this,

not about anything. Do we understand each other?"

Matthew gave me an irritated look, but eventually heaved his shoulders in acquiescence. "Fine."

"Good." I turned and picked up my DMR and helmet from the table next to us. "Now get some rest. And call for Doc if you need any aspirin for that lip. I'm going back to sleep."

### 23. Chapter 22: Nefarious Plans

#### \*\*Chapter Twenty-Two: Nefarious Plans\*\*

In the morning, after getting dressed and having some chow, I went to check on Matthew in the medical wing. He was already sitting up in his cot when I arrived, thrusting a hand over the top of his short-cut, light brown hair; a genetic trait he shared with his big brother as well as his oldest nephew, whom was named for him. It still gave me a split second of shock to see him here, in the flesh, assuring me that last night's skirmish - and the surprising discovery of my brother-in-law's survival - hadn't all been a dream after all. It'd been real. Matthew was really alive.

He looked over at me as soon as I stepped through the doorway. "Hey, Nat."

"Hey, kid. Sleep well?"

"Yeah, I slept all right."

"Anybody bother you?"

"No."

"Your lip?"

"It's okay."

He was lucky; my own nose was still throbbing pretty bad and had kept me up most of the night, but I didn't bring that up. Instead, I handed him one of the two coffees in my hand, along with a covered container. "Here. Brought you something from the mess. Coffee and a plate of scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast. And a bagel with cream cheese."

Matthew quirked an eyebrow at me. "How much do you think I eat?"

I flashed him a small smirk in return. "Don't give me that. I grew up with two brothers. I know how much guys your age eat." I let out a painful snort as I leaned back against one of the nearby tables. "I'm really looking forward to stocking up the house for my sons when they get into their late teens."

"I can tell." Digging into his cup of joe and the food, he said, "Thanks for all this, by the way."

"No problem."

I waited a few minutes for him to have at least some of his chow

before I broached the subject again. "So, like I said last night, we've got some things to discuss this morning. And you have some decisions to make."

"I know."

"Did you think about what I said yesterday?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

He shrugged. "I think you're right. My family needs to know. I should tell Willis, and my mom, and my dad and Jamie that I'm still alive. That I'm here now."

"But?" I asked.

"But...not just yet."

"Matthew - "

"Hear me out, Natalie, okay?" It was his turn now to sigh. "Right now, the fact that no one knows I'm here - or related to you by marriage - is to your benefit."

I folded my arms across my chest. "How so?"

"I have an in with the local rebel movement, and you need information to fight it. I can provide you with that."

"No, Matt," I responded instantly, shaking my head. "I can't put you in that kind of danger. Your brother would kill me. If you were ever found out - "

My brother-in-law simply shrugged again. "That's the thing. I won't be found out. Not by the rebs, and not by my brother. I guarantee it."

"How?"

"We have different last names. No one but me and you - and that medic, I guess - knows that you're my big brother's wife. Anyone else would assume we're nothing to each other but prisoner and detainer. And Will won't find out because he's not planetside. Up in space, he's none the wiser unless you tell him. You see?"

I could see the logic, sure, but it was still chock full of potential consequences I didn't want to deal with - and that I didn't want Matthew dealing with, either. I rubbed my eyes. "Matt, I told you this last night. I'm not going to lie to Willis for any reason. Especially not about this. It would devastate him. And I'm pretty sure it'd be the end of us. I'm not sacrificing my marriage to keep a secret I'm not convinced is worth keeping in the first place."

"But it's not lying," Matthew persisted. "You're just not telling him I'm alive yet. We can tell him later, after...when I feel more ready."

"Nice try, kiddo, but lying by omission is still lying. Sitting on

something so huge is deceitful, too." I took in a deep breath, wondering how I'd gotten myself into this predicament. "Besides, what is it exactly that you'd have to gain by helping us? And why would you, anyway? We're the enemy, remember. UNSC Marines."

Matthew didn't miss a beat. "I get extra time to come to terms with the fact that I'll need to tell everyone that I'm alive - who I am now, and what became of me. You get intel I know you need in order for your Marines to survive this place." He leaned forward as he met my gaze. "And as for why I'd want to help the enemy, truth is it doesn't matter to me, just like it didn't to you. You're family. You and Will. I won't fight against you two, and I don't want to see either of you get hurt. So my only other option is to help."

He would've been a good salesman in another life, Willis's baby brother, but I still wasn't fully convinced. This was something so important to Willis that I knew in my gut he'd hate me for concealing it if he ever found out, no matter the reason. But at the same time, wasn't it worth a small delay to ensure my Marines' safety here on the ground? Was it fair to choose my husband's emotional well-being over the lives of the five hundred men and women I commanded?

It pained me to admit that I honestly didn't know. I was used to making big decisions in my line of work, even gambling with lives at times, but this hit too close to home to make a rash choice. I needed to think on it, just as Matthew had last night.

Eventually, I said, "Give me a day to think about it, okay? You're not going anywhere for now anyway, so it won't put much of a damper on your plans."

My brother-in-law considered for a moment. "All right. I can do that."

"Good," I replied. After taking a sip of my coffee, I continued, "Now, we have something else to talk about. How the hell'd you wind up here?"

Matthew smiled sheepishly. "It's a long story."

"I've got some time, kiddo. Hit me with it."

\* \* \*

><p>As Matthew Hawk told me his tale over the next half-hour, I started to see how all of this had been possible - how he'd managed to survive out here all these years without any of his family knowing, and how something that huge could've escaped all of our notice. From what we'd been told twelve years ago, the transport ship Matthew had been on on his school trip had been destroyed out near the Outer Colonies by the Covies, and that was, supposedly, how he'd "died". With the Covenant pressing forward more and more towards the precious Inner planets, and with the UNSC struggling to hold them at bay at that point in the war, there'd been no time or resources for further investigation into the incident.</p>

We'd all just taken what we'd been told by the media and the school at face value and mourned. There'd been no body in the casket at Matt's funeral, but we'd accepted that as impossible to recover under the circumstances anyway. But, as it turned out, there'd been more to

it than that.

Matthew let out a tired sigh. "There really was a Covenant ship we bumped into out here. That I remember. Kids were crying, the teachers and the crew were scared, the captain didn't know what to do." He shrugged. "We were all just civvies. We'd heard of the threat, but looking back, I don't think anyone expected it to happen for real. You know how insulated the Inner Colonies were from all this for the longest time."

"Yeah," I said with a nod. "It didn't all hit me either until I shipped off to my first campaign after getting commissioned on Reach. Holy shit, did I learn fast, though. Coristal was no joke."

"Well, there you go. You can only imagine how underprepared we were." He paused before going on, steeling himself to tell the rest. "Shit hit the fan hard. We took a massive beating, and of course we had no way to fight back. I really did think I was going to die, for the longest time. A lot of people did die - the crew and kids who were unlucky enough to be berthed where the ship took the plasma salvos head-on..." My brother-in-law swallowed and shrugged again, trying to cover up his emotions. "But then some of us made it out. I don't know what it was that did it - I don't know if a UNSC Navy ship came on the scene, if something more important diverted the Covies away, if they thought we were already dead in the water, whatever. Something made the damn ship leave before they'd finished all of us off."

Matthew stopped talking then and took in a deep breath. I could only imagine how hard this was for him, to relive the horrors he'd gone through that day at only seven years of age - far from his family and under attack, with no one to turn to. I waited patiently until he found his voice again.

"We sat inside the ship for four days, locked in a tight compartment with around twenty other people out of the hundreds that had been onboard originally. Found out later it was the last part of the ship with power, oxygen, and artificial gravity. By the time the smuggler ship that rescued us passed by, we were all dirty, starving, and dehydrated, and in pretty rough shape all around." He swallowed a second time. "But we were alive. The ship that picked us up happened to be bound for Khan, so that's how I got here."

"How did you...you know, survive once you got planetside? Who raised you?"

My brother-in-law scratched at his smooth jaw, thoughtful. "Word got out that a handful of Inner Colony kids had been saved from a Covenant attack out in space. This area's never been very friendly to the UNSC, but we were just kids, and I'm sure there were quite a few who thought it'd be a chance to convert some of us to their cause. Eventually all of us were taken in by local families. That's why I joined the rebs when I was old enough, but for me it was more because I didn't know what else to do with myself after high school than because I really believe in it."

I frowned. Something that had been on my mind since yesterday was still bugging the hell out of me, and now seemed like an appropriate time to ask. A lot could change depending on Matthew's answer. "Matt, I've got to ask you something. And I need you to answer me

honestly."

"Sure. Go ahead."

The words came out slowly; I had to force myself to say them, but I also had to know. "Have you ever killed a Marine before? Or any UNSC servicemember or civilian?"

Matthew's face went white and he shook his head. "No. Never, Natalie." He rubbed his hands together, something I was beginning to see was a common nervous gesture of his. "Last night was actually my first firefight, and I didn't even fire my own weapon at anybody. I swear."

"Okay. I believe you. I just needed to know." I blew out a long breath then I hadn't realized I'd been holding. "Well, that makes things a lot easier and a lot more pleasant, to say the least."

I watched as a look of utter relief washed across my brother-in-law's face.

"But I do have one more question for you, too," I said quietly. "Why didn't you ever try to contact home? To let us know you were alive, and where you were?"

A snort escaped him now. "I was seven years old. I didn't find out what a commotion all this had caused until I was a lot older. As a kid, I didn't know how to get into contact with the Inner Colonies myself, and I'm sure my adopted family must've restricted access." Something changed in his deep brown eyes then, darkened. "Plus, for a long time, I was angry, Nat. And bitter, at all of you. I thought...why didn't anyone contact \_me\_? Why did no one ever try to find \_me\_? It's not supposed to be up to a kid to track down his family. It should be the other way around."

"I agree," I replied softly. "But we were told you were dead, and we had no reason to think otherwise, Matt. Besides, even if we had known you'd survived, we'd've had absolutely no idea where to start looking for you."

Matthew smiled sadly. "I know. I realized that later, after I passed through the worst of my early teens. It's not something I think anymore. I just...felt you should know."

"Thanks for telling me."

That seemed to be as much as either of us could handle in one sitting. We sat in silence together for another minute until finally, I stood.

"All right, kiddo. Enjoy your meal. I've got some internal stuff to work on for today, including last night's little run-in with your gang. It's put a momentary halt on our construction plans for now." I released a weary sigh. "And I'll think about your offer in the meantime, too. I'll have an answer for you by tonight, and we'll figure out what to do about all this from there. Fair?"

Slowly, he nodded. "Yeah. That's fair."

I gave him a slap on the back of his shoulder. "It's better if you

sit tight in here for now, Matt. Don't get into trouble while I'm gone."

## 24. Chapter 23: A History Lesson

### \*\*Chapter Twenty-Three: A History Lesson\*\*

\*\*\*\*0934 Hours, December 20, 2557. UNSC Outpost Columbia, \*\* Planet Khan\*\*. "The Latest Twist," Outer Colonies. Day Three of the New Age of Warfare\*\*\*\*

Much to my great dismay, there was no scotch offered at the senior officers' briefing this morning; it seemed whenever I actually really needed a stiff drink to make it through the day, there was never any on hand. It was a sad admission to make this early. We'd only been on-planet for three days now, and already it felt like we'd stepped into a situation that was going to be very difficult - if not impossible - to wrangle without bloodshed. And that was to say nothing of my own personal qualms regarding last night's events. I still wasn't even sure if I should bring up Matthew's presence on base to Colonel Dwight, either.

I sighed quietly to myself. Now I was keeping my rebel brother-in-law hidden from everyone. I didn't like it, but didn't know what else to do about it for now.

The colonel saved me from overthinking it all. "Good morning, everyone," he said, addressing Hayden, myself, and our respective XOs in the small room. "You should all know what this briefing is about, so none of this should come as a surprise." He released a sigh before continuing. "Though I know it's new for all of you since you've just arrived on Khan, you know from your pre-deployment data packets that what happened last night is no different than what we've been going through around here for months now. We're lucky you all responded so quickly, and that no Marines were killed or injured. But part of your battalions being here is to demonstrate that we will no longer tolerate aggressive actions, from any enemy faction. It's time we stop being passive about these attacks, and begin to go on the offensive."

"It's about damn time, sir," my best friend muttered beside me.

I frowned and spoke up myself. "Colonel, I'm curious to know if you've talked to the mayor about this, and what he said."

Colonel Dwight actually snorted. "Laraza and I talked earlier this morning, Major. Of course the mayor denies any foreknowledge or involvement in last night's events, and is 'deeply perturbed' by yet another attack on our outpost."

\_Just like the bomb we found on our build site that killed one of my men,\_ I thought bitterly.

"I call bullshit on that, Colonel," Major Hayden said, louder this time. "How many times can you deny involvement and have it still be true? And still do nothing about it? That bastard knows something, sir. If he's not running the whole damn show. Either that, or he's the worst mayor to ever grace the Colonies to be so ignorant about what his populace is up to."

Based on what had happened to my own Marines in the last couple days, I was inclined to start agreeing with Hayden now. I still didn't like the solution of fighting our own, though. There had to be some other way.

On the other side of me, I heard my XO blow out a breath. "The hard part, sirs, ma'am, will be distinguishing the rebels from the civvies if we're really talking about planning an assault. Do we know anything about the local movement at all? Numbers, their headquarters location, something else?"

"Harris is right, sir," I said to Colonel Dwight. "How can we go on the offensive before we know who we're fighting?"

Dwight braced his hands against the table the rest of us were seated around. "That's a good point, Captain Harris. By the same token, however, we can't just do nothing anymore. We know for sure now that at least some local insurgents are behind the attacks. This is clearly not just an alien game." The colonel looked directly at me. "But that doesn't completely exclude Major Cooper's theory of the Jackals being in on this, too. It may simply mean we've got two groups to keep an eye on and go after. Good thing we've got the manpower to do so now."

"Actually, sir, there might be a third group involved, too."

Everyone in the room turned then to face the entrance, where a young man who looked to be just a few years my junior stood leaning against the doorway. Dressed in black fatigues with short, dark brown hair and piercing blue eyes, the newcomer was very attractive - but that wasn't what had me staring. I saw the color of his battledress uniform and the unit patch sewn onto his shoulder, and I knew. He was a spook.

Colonel Dwight seemed just as surprised as the rest of us by the sudden intrusion, yet not upset. "Oh. Lieutenant Lloyd. You're back early. I wasn't expecting to see you again so soon."

The ONI operative flashed a quick grin. "You said to come back when I had info for you, sir." He held up a datachip between his fingers, then handed it over to the colonel. "I've got it, right here."

"What's on it?" Dwight asked.

"The answer to a lot of questions we've been asking ourselves lately, sir."

Dwight seemed just as annoyed by the vague answer as I was. "Well, don't keep it all to yourself, Lieutenant. If you've got fresh intel, I'll yield the floor to you and you can bring the majors up to speed."

"Thank you, Colonel. I'll do that."

The outpost commander took several steps back then and allowed the newly arrived spook to take his place at the head of the table. The lieutenant stood there for a moment with an air of sure confidence

and command presence that only an ONI operative could have at his rank. He nodded to Hayden and I first.

"Majors Cooper, Hayden. Captains Harris and Lamark. I'm Navy Lieutenant Caleb D. Lloyd, Office of Naval Intelligence." He folded his arms across his chest. "I'm sure Colonel Dwight's already told you there was a spook around here helping to figure out who - or what's - been giving us all such a headache lately. That spook's me, and I'll tell you what I've found."

"Please do, Lieutenant," I said, anxious to get to the bottom of it so we could finally all decide on what to do.

Lieutenant Lloyd briefly flashed me his grin again. "Yes, ma'am." Sharing his attention with the five of us now, he went on. "I know from your data packets on Khan that you were given a planetary map before disembarking. You can see half the planet was glassed during the war, but not this half, and not the area surrounding Redwood Falls. If you've wondered why the Covenant left this place intact, you weren't the only ones. The Office has been looking into it."

"And what have you found, Lloyd?" Colonel Dwight asked, his tone curious but his expression stern.

"What I found, sir, is that we only knew half the truth back then. It's true that both the UNSC and the local militia here at the time fought hard to save this part of the planet. But if they wanted to, the Covies would've been fully capable of glassing this half from orbit just like they did the other, thus completely bypassing the ground war that occurred here altogether. But they didn't. And it's because of this island, Marines."

Lloyd pulled out his datapad then from one of the cargo pockets on his uniform pants and pulled up a three-dimensional image of Khan, projected above the table for all of us to see. "This is Qamar Island, about fifty klicks off the coast, which is twenty klicks from us. In my recent recon of the area, I discovered a small unit of Storm troops camped out there."

A hush went through the room. This was an element we hadn't expected, and hadn't been warned about. I knew then that things were about to go from bad to worse on Khan. Now it wasn't just local rebels and Jackal pirates and arms dealers we had to worry about - but the Storm were on the scene again, too. Good thing the UNSC had had the foresight to assign two full Marine battalions to Khan...along with all of Willis's air wing.

"How many, Lieutenant?" Major Hayden questioned.

"From the photos I took, sir - which I'm transmitting to your personal pads now - it looked to be around two hundred to two hundred-fifty troops."

"You call that small?" my XO chimed in.

"I do, Captain," Lieutenant Lloyd replied. "At least in comparison to the number of Marines we've got. But things are going to get even trickier from here on out." He spared a quick glance at me as he spoke. "I can confirm what some of you have been thinking, and what

you discovered for sure with the attack last night. There is an active rebel presence here, and they've been the ones behind the mortar launches and occasional hit-and-run assaults on our outpost. They have not, however, been behind the sniper attacks we've also had in the last few days. The two Marines killed had head wounds consistent with rounds from UNSC-model rifles, yet they were not triggered by humans. The sharpshooters are in fact Jackals, but I haven't been able to determine yet how many of those might be running around - or what their angle is."

Shit, I thought. This was worse than any of us had initially imagined. To the spook, I said, "Lieutenant, what about the Storm troops? Why are they here?"

Lloyd shifted his stance a bit. "Remember the Remnant are what's left of the former Covenant's most religiously fanatic segment of aliens, ma'am." He looked right at me again. "That Storm ship that you encountered out there en route to Khan? So close to the planet? Not a coincidence, Major."

"How do you know about that?"

The ONI operative smirked this time. "Ma'am, I am a spook, remember. Anyway, there's some sort of ruins on that island. That's why it's so important to the Storm, and why the Covenant stopped short of destroying this half of the planet during the war." He ran a hand over his hair. "And that's also why it's imperative we stop the Storm from getting at whatever it is they're searching for there."

"Or, failing that, destroying it," my best friend added.

"Yes, sir," Lloyd agreed. He turned to Colonel Dwight now. "But, as always, the rest is up to you, Colonel. How do you want us to proceed?"

It looked to me like the colonel wanted to be anywhere but here now that he knew what were all really up against. I didn't blame him - I felt the same. This was the clusterfuck I'd been afraid of, and it was disheartening to know that it was now reality. But eventually, he took in a deep breath and sighed.

"Well, our immediate problem is not the Storm, Lieutenant. It's the locals. We need to find the root of the rebel movement and crush it. That'll free us up to deal with both the Jackals and the Remnant."

"So what are your orders, sir?" Lieutenant Lloyd asked.

"Focus in on the rebs for now. And I want you to start keeping tabs on Mayor Laraza as well. I agree with Major Hayden on this - he has to know something of what's going on, and it's even possible that he's the one in charge of it. But I also tend towards Major Cooper's caution. I want to have solid intel before we go attacking the wrong people - innocent civilians who aren't involved. The UNSC is already on thin ice in the Outer Colonies, and we can't afford the bad press." The colonel fixed the spook with a grave look. "I expect a report on my desk within two weeks, Lloyd. Everything Captain Harris asked for earlier should be in it - who's in charge, enemy strength, where the rebels' main hideout is located, etc."

"Yes, sir. I'll get it done."

I wondered then if I could get all that out of Matthew first. With his in, it might all take less than a day. Then I wouldn't have to keep him a secret for much longer, either. I knew spooks were resourceful, and Lieutenant Lloyd seemed more than capable, but the rebels were infamous for keeping their operations under wraps - especially the newer generation. Like Hayden had said to me, they used cloak and dagger tactics as much as ONI themselves. I had no doubt Lloyd could come up with the figures eventually, but if we could get it all much quicker, all the better for us.

Knowing what I did now about all the enemies we were facing, I made my reluctant decision there and then. I'd have to keep my husband in the dark about his brother for just a little while longer before telling him.

I heard my best friend clear his throat then, forcing me from my thoughts.

"So what do you want Major Cooper and I doing in the meantime, sir? Might be dangerous for her engineers to go back out now."

Yeah, I thought to myself. I don't want us finding another hidden explosive in our laps. But ultimately, the choice wasn't mine. I'd follow whatever Colonel Dwight decided was appropriate.

The colonel ruminated on the matter long and hard before replying. "I don't want to change anything in our established routine just yet, Major. It might tip Laraza off if he's involved. If he knows we're onto all this, things could blow up in our faces here too quickly. So just keep doing what you're doing for now, both of you, until Lieutenant Lloyd comes back with his findings. We're not ready to strike just yet." He glanced over at me. "Major Cooper, I know you might be feeling apprehensive about your site, and I understand. I don't want you putting any of your Marines in unnecessary danger. Take all the precautions you deem fit before resuming reconstruction. The mayor can't fault you for that after what happened, so it shouldn't arouse any suspicion."

"Should I still be meeting with him, too, sir?" I asked.

"Yes. Again, he might find it odd if you don't. Just...remember to keep things cordial."

"Yes, sir."

We were dismissed shortly after that, the spook disappearing from the building even before the rest of us had stepped out. And I was left with one more unpleasant task to do. I walked back over to the medical bay and took a deep breath.

Matthew stared at me expectantly when I entered. "Well? Did you already decide?"

I nodded, every word tasting bitter in my mouth. "Yeah. I'm sending you back. You're free to go."

"Under what conditions?"

"The ones we discussed. I won't tell Willis, yet." I let out a sigh, already hating myself for doing this. But since we were getting sent back out for now, I had to do what was best for my Marines. To keep them safe. "You have a week to get back to me on what you find out. And your intel better be comprehensive."

My brother-in-law met my gaze. "I'll do that, Natalie. You won't regret this."

"I better not," I muttered after him.

## 25. Chapter 24: Matters of Conscience

**\*\*Chapter Twenty-Four: Matters of Conscience\*\***

**\*\*0012 Hours, December 24, 2557. UNSC Outpost Columbia, Planet Khan.  
"The Happy Holiday," Outer Colonies. Day Seven of the New Age of Warfare\*\***

Walking through the forest surrounding Outpost Columbia in the middle of the night in full gear was not my idea of a nice Christmas Eve. For the last four years, I'd grown accustomed to spending my holidays at home with Willis and our kids, and I missed that terribly now. I should've been back on Earth trying to keep three excited children from tearing into their gifts before it was time to open them, and enjoying the festivities. Instead, I was paying close attention to keeping my footsteps silent in the dark, in the middle of a town on a hostile planet where everyone seemed to want us dead.

Merry fucking Christmas.

Glancing at all the bright green shadows through my helmet's night vision, I lowered my DMR then and came to a momentary halt just before stepping outside the outpost's secure perimeter. The last thing I wanted was a friendly bullet in my back to top this crazy mission off. I keyed my COM.

"Columbia, this is Major Cooper," I said, addressing the Marines currently on guard and patrol duty. "Moving out to the southwest for a few minutes. I just want to check out what might be around out here. I'll ping you back before reentry. Hold your fire."

I waited for several acknowledgment lights to wink green across my HUD, then brought my rifle back up and stepped forward again.

I knew I shouldn't be out here by myself; I should've brought a security detail with me, or at the very least my aide. Staff Sergeant Porter was a good wingman to have out on patrol, and as a battalion commander, the risk to me would've been huge even if we hadn't been facing three different factions of enemies at once. For a moment I went through a number of potential death scenarios in my head - a rebel popping up to shoot me point-blank, stepping on some unseen mine planted by the locals, getting sniped in the head by a disgruntled Jackal, having a plasma sword shoved in my gut - again. Unfortunately I'd already dealt with many worst-case scenarios in my career during the war. It made imaging my own death that much more vivid in my mind.

As I continued to cautiously walk around amongst the tall trees, I

suddenly heard the rustle of dried leaves up ahead. Uncertain of what awaited me in the dark, I quickly dropped to one knee and gripped my DMR tighter in my hands, looking down the sights rather than the scope. I crouched there, breathing quietly and evenly, until I heard another rustle.

"Natalie?" came a voice through the forest.

Relief flooded through me in an instant. I finally loosened my hold of the gun and aimed the barrel low across my middle. "Yeah, Matt. It's me. Step up closer, kiddo. I can't see you."

My brother-in-law did as he was told and suddenly emerged from a thick patch of trees, red trunks shooting up high into the star-dotted sky above. I knew that somewhere up there was Willis, and my gut clenched again at the enormity of the information I was withholding from him. I wouldn't have done it for anything less vital than ensuring the safety of my battalion.

In the back of my mind, I tried to assure myself that my husband would understand. Though I didn't think he would. Not when it came to his brother.

Matthew spoke again, bringing me back to the present. He was dressed in a faded pair of fatigues himself, and he held an older model assault rifle. But he had no helmet on. He looked me over in the dark. "Hey, Nat. Long time no see."

"Yup," I replied, slinging my weapon over my shoulder for now. "All of four days, huh? You said you already have something for me?"

The young rebel nodded. "Yeah." He ran a quick hand over his hair. "I'm sorry I found this out at the last minute, but you know I'm a fairly new kid, so they don't tell us much in advance. They're planning to move all of us to HQ tomorrow, Nat. To gear up. I'm guessing something big's about to go down. I hope you guys will be ready."

"\_Shit\_. Can you transmit the coordinates to me? Of your location?"

Matthew shook his head. "Too risky. I had to go through about a million firewalls and encryptions just to get the message out to you for us to meet up tonight. I can't be doing that all the time, or they'll get suspicious."

"So how should we work this out?"

"I was hoping you'd tell me."

I frowned as I thought it over. "Would you be able to slip out for a few minutes?"

"I don't know. Maybe. There's going to be a lot of us there. It'll be hard not to get noticed. I'll have to think up a reason for my absence if I do."

"That's true. But in some ways, this is good," I said, thinking aloud. "You'll know about the size of your unit, the plan of attack, and who's heading it. All the big threes." I shifted my stance a bit.

It was a gamble, but the payoff could be huge. At the same time, however, I absolutely did not want the cost to outweigh all the pros. There were some things I wasn't willing to sacrifice, and some lines I would never cross. I wanted to make that clear to my brother-in-law. "I'm worried about you, though, Matt. Are you sure this is something you can handle?"

He nodded without hesitation. "Yeah. I'll make it work."

"Okay." I let out a sigh. "Listen. I'm going to be out at the MagLev site all day tomorrow. I know it'll be difficult for you, but if you can show up close by in civilian clothes and without a weapon in your hands, you won't get noticed, at least by us. We've had plenty of onlookers during the construction, and we don't pay them much attention beyond an initial glance to see if they're hostile. How you sneak off, though, is up to you. Just don't do anything rash - I don't want you getting hurt over this, and if worse comes to worst, it's enough for us to know simply that an assault is coming. The rest would be good to have right now as well, but it's not worth getting yourself killed over. Nothing is. Understand?"

"Yes."

"Good. And keep being cautious about how you go about this. It'd be bad if you were discovered by your side, too, and I don't want that for you."

"I get it, Nat. I should try to stay safe." His eyes met my own then. "So I'll see you sometime tomorrow?"

"Yeah. And Matt? Don't make me regret agreeing to this." The only thing worse than Willis finding out I kept this from him would be if something happened to Matthew while doing it. My husband would really hate me then, and I wouldn't be able to live with myself. "If this ever gets to be too much, or you even suspect that others may be on to you, just forget about the whole thing, all right? Do you promise me?"

"I promise, Natalie."

I nodded in reply and then watched Matthew walk back into the deep of the forest. Our first real test as to whether or not this could work would be the next day. To keep myself from worrying, I had to believe that the kid who'd survived a Covenant attack on his ship at seven - and subsequently grew up on a foreign planet with no contact with his family - could handle himself.

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><p>When I got back to the outpost, I stripped off my helmet, armor, and weapon in my quarters before hitting the bunk, but found after a while that I couldn't fall asleep. I tossed and turned for an hour until I finally gave up, pulled my uniform trousers and jacket back on along with my boots, and wandered over to the mess. After picking up a hot cup of coffee from the drink dispenser inside, I took a seat at one of the empty tables and sipped on my drink. I set it down after a moment and just watched the steam rise up from the scalding liquid for a while, lost in thought.</p>

I missed Willis. I hadn't had time to call him the past few days - or

maybe I just felt too guilty. And I felt like complete and utter shit over doing what I was doing with Matt. But I couldn't see another way around it if I wanted my Marines to have a tactical edge that might just save their lives. The many had to come before the few - but it was so much harder to accept that when the few were the people you cared about most.

"Cooper. I see your new position as battalion commander is starting to weigh heavily on you." My best friend flashed me a small smile when I glanced up. "It's lonely at the top, isn't it?"

I couldn't quite bring myself to chuckle at that. So I snorted instead. "I keep hoping my drink will spontaneously morph into something alcoholic. It's 2557. Can you believe we can't just do that with our minds yet?"

Hayden laughed. "I'm pretty sure we'd have no military if that ever happened." He sobered just as quickly, though. "And it never helps to be away from home for the holidays, either, huh? Missing your kids?"

"Like you wouldn't believe. And Will, too."

"Same for me, if it's any consolation," the other major replied sadly. "I just saw my wife when we were on Earth, before we left, but I haven't seen the brood since earlier in the year. I'm sure they've all grown at least a foot by now."

I grinned weakly. "Well, aren't we an unhappy bunch." I took another sip of my coffee, still wishing it was something stronger than it was. "And stuck on a planet where every other pocket of living creatures wants us dead. Good times."

My friend matched my expression. "Just like always."

We sat in silence for a minute before I broke it.

Raising an eyebrow at Hayden, I said, "So am I the only one who thinks certain intel was withheld from us when we first got our orders to ship out? We left with two battalions and my husband's entire air group. That sends up massive, neon-lit red flags. The Corps had to know we were facing all these threats beforehand."

Oliver shrugged. "Would it have made a difference? If we knew then versus now?"

"I guess not, but...fuck." I ran a hand over my face, wincing as I passed over my broken nose. "I would've liked to know what we were getting ourselves into. I knew this wasn't going to be quick and easy, but I wasn't expecting all this."

"Well, fortunately - or maybe unfortunately, I'm not sure - we've both been through this before. Remember we had to fight the Covenant and the Flood during the war. Comparatively, this isn't that much different."

I snorted. "Yeah, I remember. I'll never forget any of it." Taking another drink, I added, "I don't know if it's helpful or sad that we're going through the same motions again. Based on all that's

happened lately, I'm half-expecting the Flood to pop back up at us, too. Just to keep things on an even keel."

"Heh. Hopefully that doesn't happen."

"Yeah."

There wasn't much left to say after that. I finished off the rest of my coffee and tossed the empty cup in the trash. "I should get back to it. I can use all the time I don't spend sleeping making myself useful. God knows there's plenty of work to go around."

## 26. Chapter 25: Battle Royale

\*\*Chapter Twenty-Five: Battle Royale\*\*

\*\*0644 Hours, December 27, 2557. UNSC Outpost Columbia, Planet Khan. "The Skirmish at Daybreak," Outer Colonies. Day Ten of the New Age of Warfare\*\*

"Ma'am? You asked to see me?"

It was times like this that I wished I had an office on the outpost like I did on base back on Earth. Everything in Columbia was either too common or too private - and to talk to a spook, I needed to make sure we weren't being overheard by others, but also that I wasn't sending the wrong message at the same time. After a few minutes of contemplation, I'd finally decided on an unremarkable spot just outside the back of the barracks. It was near the large room beside the armory that held extra pieces of construction equipment my battalion might need out on the site - and since the 8th Engineers were all currently at the build site, I didn't anticipate any unwanted visitors for now. It was as good a place as any to let the ONI operative know what I'd found.

I folded my arms across my chest. "I did, Lieutenant. I think I know all the key information the colonel asked us to look for at our last briefing. I trust my source, but I wanted to bring this up with you first to see if you can corroborate."

"Okay." The lieutenant shifted uncomfortably. "All due respect, Major, but you know I can't bring up what I know unless I'm authorized. I can probably tell you if you're on the right track, though. And if you discovered something I didn't, we can bring it to Colonel Dwight."

I nodded. "That's what I'm hoping for." I took in a deep breath. "I found out the location of the rebels' hideout the other day. Their HQ. I was half-expecting it to be the mayor's office, but it's not. From what I've been able to gather so far, it sounds like he's not even directly involved. Just a peripheral character. I believe he knows what the local insurgents are up to, and who many of them are, but he doesn't get his own hands dirty from what I can tell. Did you get the same?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. As far as numbers go, that's a little harder to determine. But it sounds like about a third of the residents of Redwood Falls are

involved - around five to six hundred people, men and women, aged eighteen to sixty-two. I know a few of the prominent members by name, but the rest can pass for ordinary citizens. It's going to be hard to distinguish them from the civvies, so we'll have to keep a sharp eye out for that and make sure we don't make any mistakes."

Lieutenant Lloyd smiled wryly. "Unless they shoot at us, Major."

"Yup. Unless that. Then we'll know for sure." I paused, then asked, "I take it you'd already gotten this far on your own, am I right?"

"That's affirmative, ma'am."

"Then you probably already know there's an assault planned for tonight," I said. "A big one, not just the small-scale stuff they've been pecking at us with on occasion to keep us on our toes. This is the real deal, Lieutenant. If we really want to go on the offensive instead of just defend, we need to attack their base of operations \_today\_."

"Oh. Shit."

I ran a hand over my hair. He obviously hadn't gotten that far yet. For my part, I'd already thought of how I was going to go about this. "Major Hayden's battalion may need backup on this. I'm ordering my own Marines to use stun rounds only, and just utilize flash-bangs. It might give us the chance to pick up some prisoners for interrogation, but more importantly, it'll spare some human lives."

The spook gave me a curious glance. "You're sure you want to do that, ma'am?"

"Yes."

"If I may ask, Major...why?"

"We're not going to rebuild the colonies by taking out more people, Lieutenant. The human race needs to repopulate, not continue to get cut down. Somebody has to stop eventually, and we all need to learn to come together again." I released a sigh. "I'll do what I have to to protect myself and my men and the outpost, but I'm not going to be the one who perpetuates our division."

When I looked up at the spook again, he had an inscrutable expression on his face; true to their nature, ONI operatives were hard to read. But in the end, I decided that what he thought of my own approach didn't matter.

"Come on," I said. "Let's take this to Colonel Dwight. I'm going to bring Major Hayden in on this, too. We need to prepare."

As I turned to go, I heard the spook behind me take a few steps forward to follow before he suddenly stopped.

"My mom was a Marine, you know," he said quietly. "She wouldn't have agreed with you, ma'am. She hated the rebels more than anything. Even more than the Covenant that killed her."

I came to a halt, too, surprised that Lloyd was telling me something so personal. But I didn't turn around just yet. "I'm sorry. The Covies killed my parents during the war, too. When did she die?"

"On Christmas Day. Twenty-seven years ago now, ma'am. I was four months old."

\_Damn,\_ I thought. I couldn't imagine how rough the last few days must've been for him. I felt bad. Still, that didn't change my own mind about things. "Those were different times, Lieutenant. That was close to the start of the war. A lot's changed since then."

And yet I sometimes wondered to myself how much they really had. Because here we were, fighting a new generation of rebels again...and some of the Covenant as well, eventually, in the form of the Storm on that island.

There was a nagging feeling in the back of my mind that we'd soon come face-to-face with other enemies in the future as well. It made it all the more important to make sure we weren't too busy fighting our own when the time came. Humanity had to relearn to depend on each other again instead of brawl.

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><p>We were almost to Colonel Dwight's office when I heard it. A sudden sharp <em>crack</em> went through the air, and I immediately threw myself onto the ground out of pure instinct, the spook hitting the dirt beside me at the same time. Face pressed to the earth since I was without a helmet, I glanced over at him to make sure he hadn't been hit.

"Lieutenant?"

"I'm fine, ma'am," came his hasty reply. "But what the hell was that?"

"I don't - " Then it hit me. "Jackals!"

No sooner were the words out of my mouth than another round pockmarked the red dirt beside me, just inches away. It was clear then that it was no longer safe to be outside. One of the aliens was targeting us. Or me.

I pushed myself up very slightly from the ground and crawled over to Lieutenant Lloyd, gripping him by his uniform collar hard. "We need to move! The bastard has a good shot!"

There was no time to waste waiting for the perimeter watch or patrol to react to the shots. The Navy lieutenant and I had to get going, now, before the Jackal out there fired off a third bullet. Keeping my body low to the ground, I scrambled over to the nearest cover - a part of the armory building - and ducked, wrapping my hands around my head when the next round pierced the wall just above me.

"Shit! Major! Let's get you inside!"

The spook crouched to the right of me just as a new noise screamed into our ears - a mortar round. I recognized the sound as an older model of the ordnance, but that ultimately didn't make a damn

difference to me. Dead was dead. I pushed my back up closer against the wall and shut my eyes tight out of reflex, hoping the explosive would hit away from here.

Lloyd was just as perturbed. He didn't move again until we heard - and felt - the round detonate amongst the trees. It'd fallen short of the outpost, but it'd taken parts of four tall redwoods with it. Scorched shards rushed out from the blast, hitting the plascrete walls of the buildings around us and shattering a couple of the nearest windows. Thankfully, nothing jabbed into flesh. As glass rained down close to us, though, I still wished hard for my armor. I knew I had to get back to my quarters somehow to get it - along with a better gun.

But in lieu of anything else at the moment, I pulled my pistol from its holster on my hip and slapped in a fresh clip. Weapon fully loaded now, I turned back to the Navy lieutenant. It was now or never. I grabbed him by the collar again.

"Lloyd, move!"

We took a risk and sprinted for the nearest entrance into the main barracks building. As we did so, a fourth sniper shot rang out, striking the door on one of its hinges. The material groaned as the door broke, hanging halfway inside now from the bullet. But the spook and I made it through.

Lieutenant Lloyd and I paused for the briefest of moments, hearts hammering in our chests and breathing hard - not so much from the exertion, but from fear. I'd almost been capped four times in less than two minutes - and got pretty damn close to getting blown up, too.

The spook voiced what I was thinking then. "I think they're after you, Major. Somebody must've painted you a high-priority target."

"Great," I mumbled. Gripping my sidearm in both hands, I gestured for him to go forward. "All the more reason not to dawdle here, Lieutenant. The barrage has to be the rebs, and they won't stop until they get a direct hit. So we better move fast."

We picked up the pace again and finally split up as I sprinted down the hall to my quarters. Once inside, I holstered my pistol and picked up my DMR instead, already fully loaded in case of attack, and began strapping on my missing gear quickly. Shoving on my helmet first, I opened up a general COM channel to all the Marines in the outpost while I put on my armor. "Columbia, this is Major Cooper! Be advised, hostiles inbound! We don't know how many yet, or who it is, but there's at least one active sniper in the area, as well as mortarmen. This looks like it might be a joint attack by human rebels and Jackals, or they may be acting separately. Either way, gear up, get to your posts, and use extreme caution." I switched channels to my own battalion then. "Eighth Engineers, this is battalion actual! Stop whatever you're doing and report back to base immediately. We're under attack!"

\* \* \*

><p><em>So much for going on the offensive,</em> I thought as the

battle outside just got more embroiled. Ducking behind half a felled tree trunk from the initial mortar round tossed our way, at the edge of the outpost's perimeter and surrounded by tens of Hayden's Marines, I shied away from targeting the rebels coming our way and focused on watching the trees instead. Somewhere in the forest, at least one Jackal sniper remained - and he'd already taken down nine men. I figured with the mass melee going on in front of Columbia at the moment, the alien wouldn't be paying much attention to a single crouched Marine. I still wondered how the Jackal was getting such good shots off in the middle of the thick forest. But one thing was for sure - somehow he was, and in order for us not to get cut down slowly one by one, it needed to be stopped.

Parts of my own battalion had eventually started trickling in during the fight, a platoon at a time. I turned to my aide then and lightly thumped his helmet to get his attention.

"Ma'am?" Porter asked.

"We're going hunting, Staff Sergeant," I said, motioning to the side. "Get your squad and let's roll."

The staff sergeant started to protest, but I shot him a quick glance that stopped him from opening his mouth. Like Doc Reynolds, we'd worked together long enough now that he knew when I got an idea in my head, I was going to see it through, risk or no risk. I wasn't just going to sit around watching more and more fellow Marines get killed. While elements of Hayden's unit was busy beating back the rebs, I'd help by taking out the Jackal.

There was another reason for my shifted focus as well. In truth, I wasn't aiming at the rebels because I was afraid one of them might be Matthew. I didn't think he was actively fighting, but I also knew he couldn't not be physically present and still maintain his cover. Somewhere in that mass of insurgents was my brother-in-law...and I hoped he stayed safe.

For now, though, I directed my attention on staying low and moving fast through the trees. With several forward lines of Hayden's Marines in front of us, it was fairly simple to sneak off to the side with one squad. It was the mortars that really kept us on our toes.

As soon as I heard the sudden whoosh go through the air, I yelled out, "Marines, get down!"

I would've tasted dirt for the second time today if I hadn't been wearing my helmet now. Hugging the red earth that reminded me of home tight, I wrapped my arms around my head and waited for the enemy round to hit, unable to do anything but pray it didn't land on top of us. When I finally felt the impact reverberate through the ground beneath me, rattling my armor, I knew we weren't dead.

But some of Hayden's Marines up ahead were. I heard the screams.

Forcing the agonized feeling aside in my mind, I pushed myself back up and shouted to Porter's squad around me, not even bothering to dust off the dirt on my uniform. "We're clear! Let's go!"

I took point again with Staff Sergeant Porter just behind, moving fast through the thick forest with my gun up, searching for that damn Jackal that was giving us another large headache on top of the other. We'd arrived on Khan with tons of Marines, probably a lot more than were needed, but an attack like this on the outpost was still proving to be devastating. If I could take out just one main piece of puzzle, it'd give us more of a shot to turn the tide.

"Look through the trees, Marines," I ordered over the COM as I slowed now, stepping carefully over dried redwood needles, not wanting to tip the sharpshooter off to our presence. "And keep your ears perked up for sounds. He might be changing position after each shot, so we'll need to hear him move."

Our pace had suddenly gone from frenetic to cautious now that we were deeper in the woods, looking for the silent assassin that we knew was here somewhere. For a moment as I looked around, I remembered another Jackal I'd killed in Ecuador four years ago, while we'd still been fighting the Covenant. Pained and enraged over the recent loss of my baby, I'd snuck up behind the alien and jabbed it in the back with my combat knife before slitting its throat, putting every last ounce of strength into the deep cuts, with more aggression than most things I'd done before or since. The memory faded as fast as it'd appeared in my head, and I shuddered.

Like Reynolds had said at the memorial wall back on Earth before we'd left to come out here, a lot of bad shit had happened during the war. Too many vivid memories I couldn't ever forget, no matter how many meds I took, and no matter how hard I tried to erase them from my mind.

"Major?" came a voice then over the COM.

I snapped out of my momentary lapse and halted out of instinct, resuming my quick glances at our surroundings. "Go ahead, Corporal."

"I see something up ahead, ma'am. Slightly to the right, about one o'clock. I think something moved."

Acting fast, I rapidly motioned for the squad behind me to stop and get down. "Stay quiet," I said low over the radio. "I want two Marines to move up next to me, low and silent. The rest of you, guns up and if you've got scopes, use 'em. I want to know where this bastard is if he's here. And if you get a shot, take it."

Still in a crouch, I inched up a little myself, my HUD scoped in through its link with my DMR. With a 3x zoom, I was able to get a good look at the area my subordinate had indicated, and I swept my rifle slowly from side to side, watching intently for any small rustle or movement. I held my breath for half a minute. There was nothing.

I was just about to zoom out when I saw it.

A sliver of a sharp, mohawked head suddenly appeared through the dark green needles of the trees in front of us. Shifting my rifle's focus ever so slightly to the right, I was able to get the perfect lead on him. As I held my breath again, I waited just another split second for the targeting reticle on my HUD to go red, and I fired off the

shot.

The Jackal's head exploded in blood in an instant, then its body dropped unceremoniously to the forest floor. A quick, silent kill. Just like the one it had inflicted on its own victims.

I crouched there with my DMR raised for one more second before I lowered my gun. Then I keyed the COM. "Kill confirmed, Marines. Let's move up and see what it's got on him."

The Jackals had become much more organized since the war. An arms dealer might have some sort of manifest or orders on it. My Marines and I were on approach when a new sound forced all of us to look up.

A sudden roar went through the trees, and I'd been around aircraft long enough thanks to my husband that I recognized it first. It was the hypersonic, taut whoosh of incoming Broadswords.

Several Marines let out loud whoops through the COM, now that the Jackal sharpshooter we'd been tracking was dead. Yet my own mind filled with trepidation along with the excitement. If we were already calling in air support, that meant the situation was bad.

It also meant Willis was planetside now. And that he'd be dirtside soon.

## 27. Chapter 26: Fight or Flight

\*\*Chapter Twenty-Six: Fight or\*\*\*\* Flight\*\*

A feeling of unease went through me as I crouched by the dead Jackal's body once the F-41 Broadswords had passed overhead. After looking over the corpse for a moment and finding nothing, my Marines forming a tight perimeter around me as I completed the search, I shifted my attention to the sniper rifle beside it - the rifle it had once clutched in its claws to kill us. It was the newest model available to UNSC forces, the 99-S5. I found that curious, considering that most of the rebels' tech was made up overwhelmingly of older model weapons. I frowned at the discrepancy, unsure of what to make of this.

I keyed my COM, opening up a channel to my best friend. "Hayden? This is Cooper. Please respond."

Much to my surprise, the reply was almost immediate. "What do you need, Cooper? We're in the middle of some rough shit here."

"It's the Jackal snipers," I said. "I just took one out, and I saw that they're using the latest and greatest. Not the old stuff."

"So? You know they've been trading and bartering for a lot of the best junk post-war."

"I know that, but it still makes me wonder." I paused to shift the DMR in my hands. "When we were first attacked this morning, I got the feeling that they might be working together with the rebs. But now I see they're using stuff that even the insurgents don't have."

"You'll have to bring that up with the spook, Natalie. I'm just as lost as you are on that."

I sighed. "All right. I'll let you get back to it. And hey? Be careful out there, buddy."

"You, too, Cooper. Hayden out."

The connection cut then and I was left with an inexplicable feeling of disappointment. Instead of getting clearer, the bigger picture of how everything tied in together on Khan was becoming increasingly obfuscated. It made me wonder how we were going to manage to dig our way out of this...and just how much longer I'd have to be away from my kids to see this through.

There was a sour taste in my mouth as I finally stood, picking up the Jackal's sniper rifle and slinging it behind my back as I did so. I turned back to Staff Sergeant Porter's squad. "Marines, let's move. We've got to get back to the main skirmish now. I'll take point."

I'd made my first move when the COM crackled again, and a man's voice came through the static-filled line. A very familiar one.

"Attention all ground teams, this is Captain William Hawk, callsign "Talon", commanding Kilo Squadron in the skies. Does anyone copy?"

A smile broke wide across my face beneath my helmet. It was good to hear his voice again, and know he was safe for now. "Talon, this is Major Cooper. I copy. What do you see up there, Captain?"

"Blurred lines, Major," Willis returned, his upbeat tone not quite matching the tactical situation we were facing. "If you want us to be of any use, ma'am, I respectfully suggest you paint some targets for us. We don't want to end up with any friendly fire."

Some part of my mind wanted to make the argument that all fighting with the rebels was friendly fire. Truce or no truce, end of the Covenant war or not, we were still up against quite a few alien enemies as well at present. I wished the insurgents could see the benefits of a common cause - of protecting humanity against outside forces, not internal - but that wasn't something I could debate with them now. At the moment, I had no choice but to protect my Marines with force. I clicked the COM again.

"I can tell you what'll do us the most good, Talon," I said. "We've been catching hell from their mortars for almost an hour now. Think you flyboys can do anything about that?"

"That's affirmative, ma'am. It's why we're here. Give me the coordinates and we'll be there."

"Sounds good. Standby."

Trying to keep my attention on our surroundings as we moved through the forest away from the site of the Jackal's death, I switched channels to my XO before bringing my DMR to bear again.  
"Harris?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I'm guessing you've heard all the commotion upstairs. We've got air support now."

"Yes, ma'am. It's nice to finally have somebody covering our asses up there. But you know this can turn into a bloodbath pretty quick if we're not careful, Major."

"I know," I replied, dejected at the thought. "It's already a melee. But we do what we have to. We're at the point now where we need to push them back with what we've got, and we can't be taking anymore hits." I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, then let out a sigh. Since the attack had come a lot sooner than I'd expected, no one in my battalion had had time to switch to non-lethal ammunition, including myself. "I'm authorizing the pilots to engage, Shawn. I need you to get me coordinates for the rebels' mortar teams, and then I'm sending Kilo in to take them out."

"Understood, Major. We'll take care of that for you and send the targets to you ASAP."

"Good. Cooper out."

I just hope Matt isn't anywhere near that, I thought, a sharp tug of anxiety going through my gut. And I hope it isn't Will pulling the trigger.

I didn't let my mind go too far down that path. It wasn't going to help anything, and there were other things to keep track of right now. Like the sudden rustle I heard up ahead.

I quickly stopped in my tracks and went down on one knee, keeping my rifle aimed straight ahead with my left hand while I raised my right in a fist. The Marines behind me halted at the silent command and lifted their weapons as well. Beyond that, I could hear some sort of a stream or brook rushing over the ground between the trees nearby, like so many of the photos of this side of Khan had shown. It sounded like the noise I'd heard had come from there, though it was distinct from the muffled sound of the rushing water. I waited there for a moment, straining to see, but nothing stood out to me amongst the thick needles. Slowly, I began to creep in a little closer.

With my Marines on my six, I got as far as the creek that cut through this section of the forest before I heard the sound again. The water looked to be about three or four feet deep in the middle, but I only took it in with a glance. The rest of my focus was on finding the source of the other noise.

The noise that I quickly saw belonged to yet another Jackal as I turned to see around the next thick tree trunk.

No. Six Jackals.

Caught off guard, my eyes went wide for a second before my mind snapped to and I brought my gun up, quickly took aim, and let off a rapid burst. The first alien sharpshooter was down in a flash. But now, the others reacted. I dove to the ground for what seemed like the millionth time today, barely missing the sudden barrage of sniper rifle fire at extreme close range. If I wanted to go out with a bang,

this was it.

But I didn't want out. I wanted to live, and get home to Willis and our three kids as soon as I could. So I raised my gun again from the dirt and fired a second time. The bullets went wide this time and I cursed, fixing for a better target as I lay prone on the muddy bank. I could hear Porter and his Marines opening up now, too, but they weren't around the bend quite yet where they could rattle off a good shot. For the next few seconds, I was on my own.

That's when one of the Jackals primed a brilliantly lit plasma grenade in its hand and sent it hurtling towards me.

Having no time for anything else, I went with my instincts and rolled sharply to the left, forcing myself down the narrow but steep embankment and into the creek to avoid the explosive. As I sputtered in the water for a moment, the grenade hit right where I'd been laying a fraction of a second earlier. Then it detonated.

Red mud and water and dirt went up in an instant in a huge column of elements, while I dove as deep under the shallow water as I could and braced myself against the sediment-littered creek bed. Somehow in the moment, I loosened my grip on my rifle and lost it, but the water was clear and the current not strong enough to push it too far. As soon as I realized the blast hadn't killed or injured me, I plucked it back up from the creek bed a few feet ahead and then resurfaced.

A cacophony of automatic weapons greeted me upon my return to solid earth and sky. There were a few sharp cracks of sniper rifles in between, but I knew from experience - during training, at least - that long-range guns were notoriously hard to aim point-blank. The frantic shots went wide like my own last burst had gone, splintering into the nearby tree trunks and the dirt and a couple in the creek, but none ever found purchase. When I raised my gun again, soaking wet from my trip underwater and with chunks of mud falling off my uniform, there was only one Jackal left standing. I took it out fast with a quick, tight burst to the gut. And then that part of the skirmish was over.

I stood there with water dripping from my clothes and helmet and equipment and just took in deep breaths for a minute. What I really wanted to do was have a seat by the creek and take in what had just happened. But I knew we still had a lot of work to do. I found all eyes on me when I lifted my head.

Staff Sergeant Porter stepped up to me uncertainly. "Ma'am? Are you okay?"

I briefly lifted the faceplate on my helmet so he could see my expression. I grinned. "Well, I'm not dead yet, Staff, if that's what you're asking. Ready to forge ahead, Marines?"

"Yes, ma'am!" they shouted emphatically through the COM.

"All right," I said, my grin widening as I slapped my visor back down. "Then let's get those coordinates for our flyboys in the skies and see if we can't end this."

\* \* \*

><p>We reached the middle of the forward lines again just a few minutes later, satisfied now that we'd eliminated the active snipers in the area. All we had to do at present was push back the rebels - a task, like many, that was easier said than done. I hit the COM and opened a channel to Captain Harris the moment we arrived, crouching behind some solid cover with Porter beside me as I hailed him.</p>

"Shawn? Do you got a bead on those mortars yet? Pilots are waiting on us."

There was a slight pause this time before my XO answered. The line was filled with static - or maybe it was the intense weapons' fire all around. "Yes, ma'am. They're on the rebels' six, as expected, Major. Uploading the data to your pad now."

I cursed as I dropped my rifle in my lap and thrust a wet hand in my pocket to look for my datapad. I found it by touch and flicked it on, quickly read off the letters and numbers, then raised my husband. "Wi - uh, Talon? This is Cooper. Do you read?"

"Loud and clear, Major," Willis responded, the undertone of amusement still in his voice. "You have coordinates for me, ma'am?"

"Yeah, I do. They're as follows: four-three-one-five by seven-six-niner-niner, more sets to come. I'm sending them all to you now. You're free to engage. Let me know when you're coming in hot and I'll get the rest of us out of the way."

"Acknowledged. We'll be on approach shortly, Coop."

The next few moments were all a matter of getting my battalion and Hayden's Marines to duck without looking like they were giving up the fight to the rebs - we didn't want to tip our hand too early. Although with the unmistakable roar of Broadswords overhead, I really wondered how many of them didn't think we'd use our aircraft on them.

Well, they were about to find out.

I was already keeping myself curled up between the ground and the thick redwood trunk in front of me when I heard my husband's voice flood my helmet again.

"Attention ground, this is Talon. Kilo is coming in hot. I repeat, we're coming in hot, so keep your heads down and enjoy the show."

For my part, I knew I'd be spending the show an anxious wreck, hoping and wondering if Matthew would get out of the way in time. I prayed he would. Beyond that, I knew that many of the rest of the rebels had brought this on themselves. We'd been willing to listen, willing to help and cooperate, and yet they'd still resorted to this. I didn't think killing was right, but neither was biting the hand that fed you.

There had to come a point when you had to bite back to stay safe. If only to send a message, and for the hope that that would deter them in the future.

I thought of all this as I heard my husband and his squadron suddenly swoop in low over the treetops in their F-4ls, with nothing but the numbers I'd relayed to them helping them along. It wasn't as if you could see much from up there. But I was confident in Willis's piloting skills. He was nothing if not top-notch.

I thought I heard the slightest shudder or groan of metal as the Broadswords dropped their payload, but that may have just been in my head. What I truly felt and heard in a more concrete, immediate way were the huge explosions. They made the earth quake beneath my boots, shook my teeth from the inside, and had me shutting my eyes tight out of reflex. When it was done, I glanced up just enough to watch the last fireball erupt through the forest, and then the friendly aircraft screamed out of earshot again.

Though it seemed strange, the whole area fell in a sudden hush as soon as the Broadswords were gone. A few weapons continued going off here and there, on both sides, but they were isolated shots that went silent a couple minutes later. For what felt like an eternity, I wondered what was going on, straining to see above my cover and listening intently to the soundlessness over the COM. It was almost eerie.

Then came the update from Willis.

"Major Cooper?"

"Go ahead, Talon."

He sounded somehow weary rather than jubilant this time. "Mission accomplished, ma'am. Targets have been neutralized. Those mortars won't be giving you anymore headaches from here on out."

Part of me wanted to breathe a sigh of relief. The other part hated the fact that I'd just sent my husband in to bombard some insurgents out of existence. I settled for an unsteady sigh. "Got it, Talon. Great work. And thanks. Tell your pilots that too from me."

"I will, Cooper. I'll see you dirtside soon."

It was everything I wanted and everything I feared at the same time, but I kept both those feelings to myself. I'd just have to find some way to locate Matthew and warn him not to get caught walking around before Willis landed. Once again, easier said than done, but I had a lot of incentives that compelled me to at least try. Still, I wasn't quite sure how I'd accomplish that with a full-blown fight going on until I heard my best friend's voice over the radio.

"Natalie? Do you see this?"

"Huh?" I said, abruptly coming out of my thoughts. "See what?"

"This. What's happening in front of us. The rebels are retreating."

Surprised, even though I still couldn't hear the sounds of battle going on around me anymore, I pushed myself up higher from my cover and got my first good look around - now that they weren't any bullets flying. Far ahead of us, well forward of the main line of Marines, I

could see figures darting between the trees, moving away from the outpost now. I snorted in pure astonishment.

"I'll be damned," I whispered. "I'd always been told the rebs never ran. At least not the old ones."

Hayden actually laughed. "Guess the older generation was made of sterner stuff. Or maybe these guys are just smarter and know when they're outgunned and beat."

"Live to fight another day," I said. "That yearning's in all of us I guess."

"I guess you're right." I heard him release a tired sigh. "Well, that's fine by me. We've been through enough for one day, I think."

"Yeah. You can say that again."

"Cheer up, Cooper," Hayden replied then. I could hear the slight smile in his voice through the COM. "You're the one who gets your spouse back for a day, along with the thrill of victory. Enjoy it."

I chuckled as the connection cut. Oliver didn't know that it remained to be seen whether this would be a happy visit, or a nightmare.

## 28. Chapter 27: A Messy Alliance

### \*\*Chapter Twenty-Seven: A Messy Alliance\*\*

When the skirmish was over, the first thing I wanted to do was change into some dry clothes - I was still soaked from head to toe, and it was awfully uncomfortable moving around in sopping wet socks, boots, and underclothes beneath the weight of heavy gear. Red dirt and mud covered my battledress jacket, armor, and pants in some places, too, from my quick-but-not-quite-clean getaway from the snipers. But, since there were many things I had to take care of beforehand, changing would have to wait. I had to make sure my battalion was squared away first, and then I needed to find some way to get into contact with Matthew before his brother landed.

All in a day's work, I thought with a heavy sigh. Or in this case, a single morning.

As I made my way over to the scattered platoons and companies of my battalion to check on them, Major Hayden accosted me, much to my chagrin. It looked like he was trying hard not to laugh as he looked me over.

"Damn, Cooper. Someone should've told you it's never a good idea to try to swim with the fishes."

I pulled off my helmet and gave him a look. "I was trying not to get myself killed in the forest - pretty much the opposite, actually. The Jackals we found in the woods forced me to make a move, and it was either take a dip or become a nice red splatter in the dirt. I think you can guess what I chose."

"All right, all right. No need to get touchy. You know I was kidding." He pointed to the second rifle slung behind my back, also wet. "What's that?"

"A souvenir I need to show the spook when I get a chance," I answered, softening my tone. Being drenched everywhere was making me a tad irritable. "This is what I was telling you over the COM earlier. The Jackal bastards are going high-tech on us. I'm hoping our esteemed colleague will be able to make sense of things."

"I'm sure he will. He seems like a sharp kid."

"He is," I agreed. "And he's not as...antisocial as other spooks I've met. He actually seems like a decent guy outside of that."

For a moment I thought of another ONI operative I'd worked with five years ago during the war, when Bravo Company and I had been fighting the Flood in the frozen mountains of Austria. Taken prisoner by the grotesque, parasitic beings and held captive for days, Lieutenant Commander Stephanie Glorio had seen her whole team get turned into decaying monsters before we'd rescued her from the infested Covenant camp. Though she'd tried hard to keep it together afterward, something about her circumstances had knocked more than a few screws loose in her head, and she'd eventually cracked. After going berserk one day and killing my aide at the time, thinking he was a walking corpse like the rest - and very nearly killing me for the same reason - the spook's life had finally ended with a plasma sword to the back, courtesy of our Elite ally. For all his faults, Atom had saved my life that day, and it wasn't something I'd ever forget.

Although I'd had few interactions with him so far, I could already tell that Lieutenant Lloyd was much different.

"Anyway," Hayden said then, bringing me back to the present, "we should get back to work. I just wanted to let you know I'm keeping my battalion on heightened alert now. The perimeter's going to be tight and fortified, as always, and we'll be on the lookout constantly in case the rebs - or the Jackals - want to try this again. You should let Willis know when he comes in with his flyboys."

I nodded. "I will. Thanks."

My best friend reached out and gave one of my shoulders a squeeze. "Hang tough, Natalie."

"You, too, Oliver."

\* \* \*

><p>After getting the 8th Engineers assembled and accounted for, I sent them on their way to get cleaned up and resupplied following the assault. Beyond that, I'd have to meet with Colonel Dwight before giving them further orders - no doubt there'd be a senior officers' debriefing later in the day concerning the attack, and I wasn't sure what the colonel wanted to do about the reconstruction now. This deployment had quickly gone from benign to the usual: surrounded by enemies on all sides, and doing what we could to stay afloat.</p>

In the meantime, though, I shifted my attention over to the next

priority - meeting with up Matt. Since I had no sure way of contacting him remotely without one or both sides noticing, I set off by myself to scour the woods under the premise of going to greet the incoming pilots personally. I knew it was a longshot, but it was better than doing nothing and just hoping that the two brothers didn't randomly bump into each other.

Twenty minutes into the search, I'd still found no sign of my brother-in-law. I frowned, worried and still feeling like crap in my soiled uniform. It was starting to grow damp now, and my legs were getting tired of holding up all the added weight. But I pressed on, telling myself that this was important, that it was too soon to give up. Besides warning him about Willis's impending arrival, I had to know Matthew was safe, for my own peace of mind.

"Jesus, Nat," a disgruntled voice suddenly said through the trees.  
"Thanks for taking forever. I've been hiding out here for an hour now, waiting for you to show up."

I felt myself releasing a sigh of relief without consciously thinking about it. I took a few more steps forward into the forest, and then my brother-in-law revealed himself, standing there in his worn fatigues with his old rifle slung on his shoulder.

Placing my hands on my hips as I looked down at my scuffed boots for a moment and swallowed, I finally glanced up again and said, "Shit, Matt. It's good to see you alive. You had me pretty worried there for a while."

Matthew snorted. "Not bad enough. Your flyboys dropped quite a load on us, you know that? I barely got out of the way in time. My armor's scorched and I even felt the heat wave wash over me. Some of my buddies weren't as lucky."

"I hate to say it, kid, but that's the price you pay for choosing the wrong side," I retorted, annoyed at the fact that he was angry with me, even though on some level I could understand why. I took in a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Matt. I didn't want you to get hurt, really. But that assault didn't come when you said it would, and we weren't exactly prepared. I did what I had to to keep my Marines and our outpost secure. And it looks like it worked, because your guys cut out right after."

"\_You\_ authorized that strike?" he asked, incredulous. "Even though you knew I was out there?"

"Yeah," I replied, feeling a little guilty now. Another thing to add to the list, I thought sadly. "It was a calculated risk, kiddo, and I had to take it."

"I can't believe this. I trusted you - that's why I'm working with you. I'm trying to keep you and Will and your Marines out of harm's way. How could you - "

"Hey," I said sharply then. "Don't give me that. Before your 'friends' launched their assault on our outpost, I was almost flatlined by not one, but four sniper shots. And a mortar round. They knew who I was, and my position. Explain that to me. How should I be trusting you after that?"

To his credit, my brother-in-law went pale then. "Oh, shit. Natalie, I don't know about that. Really, I swear. I didn't say a word about you to anyone, just like you haven't about me."

"Well, that's going to change."

"What do you mean?"

I sighed a second time. "Your brother's here now, groundside. Or he will be, in just a few minutes. If you want to keep up the charade, you're going to have to lie low for a while - or at least keep out of sight around here. He'll recognize you as soon as he sees you, just like I did." I ran a hand over my face now, suddenly feeling weary. "Matthew, listen to me. If this is going to work, we have to be able to trust each other. I can't just lay down and not do anything while we're being attacked. You need to understand that. And I know you can't, either, if you want to keep up appearances. But I never once fired my own weapon at any humans during the assault, because I was afraid of hitting you. When I authorized that strike, I just had to believe that you weren't near the mortars that were wasting my men by the dozen. Do you get that?"

Matthew's stance stiffened, but eventually he nodded. "Yeah. I get that. And I'm sorry about the snipers. Whatever or whoever okayed that, I don't know. But I do know I had no part in it. I hope you believe me."

"I do," I answered softly. "Just like I hope you believe I wasn't trying to kill you. This can get complicated at times, Matt."

"I know."

"And it'll only be harder now that your brother's dirtside. I hope you're ready for that, and remember what I said about what to do if it gets to be too much." I folded my arms across my chest as I widened my stance. "I really think that once you tell your family, it won't be as bad as you think, and you'll feel much better about everything anyway."

"I guess. I'm just...not quite ready yet."

"Then like I said. It's better if you steer clear for a while. If you need to contact me, see me at the site or shoot me a message, if you can manage."

My brother-in-law nodded. "Okay. I'll do that."

"And Matt?"

"Yeah?"

"Stay safe, kiddo." Because it's not just this mess you've got to worry about, I thought to myself.

Somewhere on that island off the coast was the Storm. And I had a feeling that that situation wasn't going to remain peripheral for much longer. For any of us.

## \*\*Chapter Twenty-Eight: Harboring a Secret\*\*

My quarters were silent as a tomb when I walked in compared to the overabundance of sounds I'd experienced outside during the fight. I'd been hyped up with adrenaline on and off for the last few hours, too; now I just felt exhausted. I set my weapons down carefully near my desk, including my DMR, the dead Jackal's sniper rifle, and my pistol holster, knowing I'd have to thoroughly dry and clean each later, part by part. For now, though, I finished tugging off the rest of my outer layers of equipment, then headed for the showers.

It was while I was under the spray of lukewarm water that I really started to feel the physical impact of today. My whole body felt sore, my still-healing nose was throbbing, I had a headache from my conversation with Matthew, and I could feel a hundred tiny pinpricks of pain here and there from scratches and bruises I'd sustained during the battle - most coming from throwing myself on the ground hard with all my gear on to evade shots. And mortars. And grenades.

I decided it'd been a long half-day so far.

Yet the physical was still nothing compared to the mental turmoil I faced now.

I shut my eyes tight under the spray and swallowed down on the sudden lump in my throat. Willis's arrival groundside could either remedy that for me, or make things worse. And the fact that the latter was even an option was my fault. I was keeping something from him that I'd known all along I shouldn't, but to protect the men and women I led, I'd agreed to my brother-in-law's bargain.

Only after this morning, I wasn't quite so sure anymore how good that deal really was. Some of Matthew's information had indeed helped us, but most were things our spook had already found out on his own, well within the time frame established for him. I'd discovered the rebels' plans to attack us without Lloyd's knowing, but at the same time, I'd been wrong about when, and that had gotten me into morally ambiguous territory when I hadn't been able to prepare by issuing non-lethal ammunition and ordnance to my men as I'd wanted to. And despite the foreknowledge, I'd still almost gotten Matthew killed while attempting to keep my own Marines safe.

That wasn't right. None of this was. I saw now that the costs were starting to far outweigh the benefits. And that I'd made a big mistake.

Turning off the water, I remained standing there for a moment longer in the stall, bracing my hands against the wall with my head down, deep in thought. I was thirty years old now, nearing thirty-one soon. There was no good excuse for my actions anymore, no way to say I was too naïve to know any better. I did know, and I'd still done it. Somehow, I'd found myself trusting and believing that a nineteen-year-old boy actually knew what he was doing, and so I'd inadvertently put him in harm's way instead of getting him out. I should've told Matthew when I met up with him earlier, then and there, that this was done.

But I hadn't, and now I'd have to wait till the next time I saw him

to tell him. I wasn't going to put him in danger again, whether he wanted me to or not. Yet until I spoke with him, I'd still have to keep the secret from Willis...and that killed me.

By the time I towed off and changed into a spare set of fatigues, fifteen more minutes had passed. I figured my husband had to be dirtside by now. I'd stepped into the mess to grab a quick cup of coffee before returning to my quarters when I saw him.

He was sitting alone at one of the tables, nursing a hot mug of joe himself, still dressed in his flight suit. His short, light brown hair had been flattened a little on top from his helmet, but he still looked as good as ever. I smiled to myself, momentarily forgetting everything I'd been worried about for what seemed like ages lately, and walked over to greet him.

"Hey, Mister," I said, my smile morphing into a big grin.

Willis finally glanced up then and he grinned, too. "Hey, Cooper." He looked around a little nervously at the other Marines eating around us. "I'd greet you properly, but...doesn't look like the right environment for it."

"That's never stopped us before."

I leaned down and kissed him lightly on the lips. It was a lot less than what I wanted to do after almost two weeks apart, but it sufficed for now. Just having him here in front of me again was already more than I could've hoped for this soon.

When I took a seat across from him after that, he was smirking. Willis shook his head.

"You don't know what you do to me sometimes, Coop."

I snorted, aware that the stupid grin was still on my face. "We've been married ten years now, honey. I know exactly what I'm doing."

"Such a tease." He took another sip of his coffee and then leaned in close, his voice going low. "And to think you're my superior. You're setting a terrible example, Major."

I laughed, then gently shoved my hand against his chest to push him back. "All right, enough. Why don't you tell me where you've been the last couple weeks."

My husband raised an eyebrow at me as I took a sip of my own drink. "Why not the other way around? You were supposed to call me, remember. I haven't heard from you in days."

That's because I've been trying to figure out how to keep the fact that Matthew's still alive a secret from you, I thought.

I was instantly filled with self-loathing over that, and the smile abruptly faded from my face. Ever the perceptive one, Willis picked up on my sudden change of mood in seconds.

"Natalie? What's wrong?"

In the past, when I'd met Willis in the mess hall after some time apart with joy followed by apprehension, it'd been because I was about to tell him I was pregnant. This time, that wasn't the case - although the information I wanted to blurt out at him would probably have about the same emotional impact. For now, though, I held my tongue for Matthew's sake. I wasn't accustomed to lying, however, and I stumbled around my words.

"Nothing, Will," I said with a quick wave of my hand. "Don't worry about it." I let out a sigh then to cover it up. "It's just been a very long morning, is all."

"Tell me about it. From what we could see up in the air, that skirmish looked crazy. It must've been pretty rough for you down there."

I took another swallow of my coffee before replying, "Yeah, it was. But the fight wasn't even the half of it."

"What else happened?"

"I almost got shot today," I said. "Four times. More if you count the point-blank ones. Came close with two different explosives, too." I snorted into my cup for the second time. "That's gotta be some kind of record, right?"

I didn't want to worry him, but I also wanted to be honest - at least about everything that wasn't in relation to his brother. That, I'd have to explain to him later, and hope he'd understand.

For the first time in the thirteen years I'd known him, I sensed that my husband couldn't quite figure out what was going through my head. Still, Willis reached across the table and offered me his hand. I took it.

"Shit, Natalie. I'm sorry. That sounds bad. Did you just get unlucky, or do you think..."

"That someone wants me dead? That they were targeting me, specifically? Yeah, I do. It started off as just one sniper. And it was right before everything else."

"Damn," he replied. Running his free hand over his hair, he added, "Please be careful, Coop. Even more than you have been. I don't want to see you get hurt."

"I will." I gave his hand a small squeeze. "We've got a spook out here, you know. I'm going to have him look into it for me, along with some other stuff."

"Like what?"

It was my turn to give him a questioning look. "Did you get any updates of what's been going on down here while you still aboard ship?"

He shrugged. "A few. Not a lot. I was counting on getting most of that from you when you called."

"Oh. Well, there's a lot to catch you up on, then." Without thinking

about it, I found myself counting off events on my fingers. "I guess our story starts with those two Marines that were killed by snipers the night before we got here. Then there was the bomb that went off at my build site that took another one. Then the nocturnal hit-and-run later that night." I finally met his hazel eyes. "All of it culminated with today's assault."

"Wow. Holy shit. You guys haven't had it easy down here, huh?"

"Nope," I answered. "Not so much."

My husband shook his head in disbelief. "All that in less than two weeks? Fuck, Natalie."

"It's okay, Will. I'm still here."

"Yeah, but - "

I smiled wryly at him. "This is what we signed up for, remember? Gotta roll with the punches sometimes." Even if it landed you in a creek. "So? Tell me what brought you dirtside, and what living in the lap of luxury in that bucket in the sky was like while I've been gone."

Willis knew I was trying to distract him from his worries by changing the subject, but he bit. "Officially, we're here to take back some of the wounded to our facilities upstairs. The Suave Affair's medical bay is better equipped for the complex stuff from what I hear. There's more supplies, and it's safer from attack. Since we're already down here, we brought in some new gear, too." He leaned forward again. "I hear the outpost CO might want us on an op soon as well. Strafing run...or maybe more of what we did today."

That could only mean the rebel HQ. I sat there a moment, thinking how obvious that was as our next move, but worrying the entire time about the fact that Matthew was still a part of that, and might be there when shit finally hit the fan. I'd have to get him out before then.

"Does that bother you?" I asked quietly. "You know these are people, right? Not ex-Covies?"

"It does and it doesn't. They're people, yeah, but they've chosen to turn on us. On the rest of humanity. They've tried to kill you, for God's sake, multiple times it sounds like. A part of me feels bad, but...I've got to protect my family." He took my hand again and gave it a squeeze. "I've got to protect you."

Your family includes Matt, though, I thought to myself. And whatever you do against the rebs for now will hurt him, too.

There was no easy way out of this, I realized then. I'd made a huge mess of things without meaning to, in an attempt to do good. To spare lives. But it had backfired.

Soon, I knew I'd have to find a way to make it right.

\* \* \*

><p>By the time we got back to my quarters, I was ready for a nap. With no orders to resume construction coming down the pipeline - and with the battle we'd just fought still fresh in all our minds - I decided to give my battalion the rest of the day off. That freed me up as well to spend time with Willis. I had to make sure his being here was approved of first, though.</p>

As I laced my hands around the back of his neck, I looked up at him and asked, "So...are we squared away?"

"You mean did Colonel Dwight approve my request to be billeted together while I'm groundside? Yes."

I smirked as he slowly pulled me closer by my belt loops. "Good. Nice work, Captain."

"Thank you, ma'am."

He leaned in and kissed me then, still delicate but with more passion than the one I'd given him in the mess. I tightened my own hold on his neck and kissed him back a little harder.

I'd really missed him. During the Human-Covenant War, two weeks apart would've been nothing, as we'd routinely spent much more time separated, but the last four years we hadn't gone more than a week without seeing one other. He was my lover, my best friend, my partner in everything, and the father of my kids. It made it all the more difficult to come to terms with what I was hiding from him.

I almost felt guilty making love to him when I knew the magnitude of the secret I kept. But for just a short while, I wanted to forget about everything else and just be with Willis.

### 30. Chapter 29: Time to Spare

\*\*Chapter Twenty-Nine: Time to Spare\*\*

\*\*\*\*1502 Hours, December 28, 2557. UNSC Outpost Columbia, Planet Khan. "The Aftermath," Outer Colonies. Day Eleven of the New Age of Warfare\*\*\*\*

Not surprisingly, word came down from Colonel Dwight the next day to cease all reconstruction operations immediately - that left me in charge of five hundred anxious Marines with little to do on the outpost, since Major Hayden's battalion was already taking care of added security along with Columbia's original contingent of men. And because we'd found out the day before that it wasn't too safe to be caught walking around outside anymore, we were all confined to the buildings. It made for a vexing morning, but we all knew it wouldn't last for long. The attack yesterday had convinced Dwight fully that going on the offensive was the only next step, and plans for our own operation against the rebels were already underway. I was to have no further contact with the mayor of Redwood Falls, and there'd be no more negotiations. This was now a full-fledged combat posting.

I didn't agree much with the blanket assessment of the area, although I did feel that the only thing left to us was to move forward as well. We'd tried all we could to keep relations cordial, had forgiven a lot, and got shit on more than once in return...and I was suddenly

at the top of the rebs' most wanted list, it seemed. Now, it was time to add more bite to our bark.

But I was afraid of what that would mean for the civilian population of southern Khan. After the senior officers' debriefing, I'd held one of my own with my battalion's officers and made it clear to them that as far as I was concerned, it was still an ask first and shoot later policy until we left for the rebel HQ. Even then, I'd be equipping everyone with non-lethals. We didn't know how big a threat the Storm troops on the island posed yet, and at least in my mind, it was never too late for humanity come back together.

Dressed in full gear with a loaded pistol on my hip holster - a sharp contrast to when we'd first arrived here two weeks ago - I made my way through the buildings to the medical wing. Fourteen of my Marines had been wounded in the fight yesterday, eight badly enough that they were going to be part of the group Willis brought back up to the Suave Affair for recovery. My husband and his pilots were set to take off in an hour, and I wanted to make sure I went and spoke to each injured Marine before then.

I'd spent a lot of time in and out of hospitals and medical tents myself during the war. I knew how uplifting a brief visit from a friendly face could be, especially that of a superior officer. It made you feel like the pain and sacrifice you'd gone through wasn't in vain.

When I finished making the rounds a while later, I ran into Doc Reynolds on my way out. I hadn't seen him much since the night we'd found Matthew, so I stopped to say hi.

"Hey, Doc," I said to him. "It's been some time."

He glanced up at me with a faint grin. "I could say the same, Major. You used to land unconscious by my feet with alarming frequency. Concussions, cuts, broken bones, open wounds..."

"All right, I get it," I replied, a small smile appearing on my face now, too. "Whatever happened to the good old days when I was always on the verge of dying, right?"

"Nah," Reynolds said then. "In all seriousness, ma'am, I'm glad your rank finally forced you to mellow out a bit and take things slow."

I snorted as I thought of all the close calls I'd had yesterday. "I'm not sure that's been the case much lately, Doc. I've just gotten wildly lucky." I folded my arms across my chest and sighed. "I bet it's about to change, though. A mission's never complete until I'm facedown in a pool of my own blood."

The medic looked over at me again, saw the wry grin on my face, and shook his head. "I hope not, Major."

"So, really. How have things been around here so far, Michael? What was the final tally yesterday for the 8th?"

Reynolds let out a sigh. "Six were killed by snipers, ma'am, dead before I could get to them. I had five more die on me by the end of the fight." He shrugged sadly. "Everyone else you just saw in the bay who's getting evaced today, I saved. The rest were all

minor."

"Damn." As usual, the medic had saved a lot more than he'd lost, but I knew he'd focus only on those he hadn't been able to get to in time. I reached over to grip his shoulder. "Don't sweat it, Doc. You did what you could. And in terms of battalion-strength, that's not bad."

"I know, Major. But it's still hard."

I knew how he felt. I was the same way, always beating myself up over what I'd done wrong instead of looking at what had gone right. But oftentimes, that was what drove you to do better the next time.

\* \* \*

><p>Ironically, even though I wasn't working out at the MagLev site anymore, it still felt like I had a monstrous list of things to take care of today. I still had to go see the spook about the sniper rifle I'd found, and another item of business to attend to tonight as well. For now, though, Willis was leaving for the next few hours, heading back up to the <em>Affair. <em>I wasn't going to miss out on my chance to see him off.

I returned to our quarters to find him stuffing the last of his gear in his pack. Then he zipped up his flight suit while I made my way across the room.

"Hey, Cooper."

"Hey, Will. Got everything ready?"

"Just about." He stood and pulled me closer, giving me a deep kiss that I immediately reciprocated. Then his voice lowered. "I was sad to see you go this morning, you know."

"I'm sad to see you leave now," I replied.

"I'll be back in a couple hours. Then I'll be at your disposal as long as you want."

I raised an eyebrow at him and smirked. "Is that a promise?"

My husband chuckled as he gave me a wink. "It can be. But for now, I've really gotta go." He leaned in to kiss me again. "I love you, Coop."

"I love you, too. Stay safe."

"Always."

\* \* \*

><p>The new regulations we'd been ordered to follow inside the walls of Outpost Columbia made it difficult for me to find a place to talk to Lieutenant Lloyd again. But it was necessary, and I finally chose an alcove just outside the mess hall, well-guarded by Marines up above yet out of earshot, hidden from snipers, and off the beaten path for the most part. Still, I opted to pull my helmet on this time whenever we were outdoors. When he approached, I saw that the ONI

operative had done the same.<p>

Lieutenant Lloyd gave me a small nod of acknowledgment in lieu of a salute. "Major."

"Lieutenant," I said.

"So...yesterday was interesting. Either you were fed the wrong information about the assault, ma'am, or your source was."

"I trust my source, Lieutenant, so it must've been him that was duped." I looked down at my boots for a moment. "Either way now, it doesn't matter. I'm leaving the cloak and dagger games to you, like I should have all along. This is clearly not my area of expertise."

I could hear the smile in his voice. "Glad to hear it, Major. Working in Intelligence isn't for the faint of heart. My dad told me that when I was recruited."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Why did you accept?" I found myself smirking beneath my helmet. "Or is that even something you can tell me?"

"Why do you want to know?" he countered.

"You don't seem like the type, Lieutenant. You're awfully chipper for a spook sometimes."

"Heh. Get that from my dad, ma'am."

Lloyd was quiet for a long time after that. I wasn't even expecting an answer out of him when he finally sighed. "My mom wasn't just a Marine, Major. She was a spook. I found out when I got older, and I wanted...I wanted to follow in her footsteps. I wanted to do this for her. Maybe to understand her a little better, be close to her in some way, I don't know. But here I am, and I'm loving every minute." Some of his strong sense of confidence returned. "And I found that it's something I'm pretty damn good at, too."

I chuckled. "That you are, Lloyd." I pulled the sniper rifle down off my back then, thinking how nice it'd be to be back on a base so I could go out for a beer with the guy. I was starting to really like the self-assured spook with the tragic past - and besides being curious about his story, I found myself wanting to be friends with him. "But back to business. I wanted to run a couple things by you, see what you can turn up."

"Yes, ma'am. What did you need?"

"This rifle. I picked it off one of the Jackal snipers yesterday. It's our newest model."

The lieutenant instantly understood where I was going with that. He took the rifle in his hands and looked it over. "Hmm. So they haven't been trading with the rebs, then. Either that, or the insurgents have access to fresh tech now."

"Exactly. I was hoping you could tell me which is the case, and figure out how the two groups are connected. It'll make it easier for us to take them down. Whatever you find, we'll bring to Colonel Dwight's attention."

"I can do that. What else?"

"What happened to us yesterday, before the assault..."

"You mean what happened to you, Major?"

"Um...yeah."

"I'm already on it, ma'am. There's no doubt that sharpshooter was gunning for you." He lifted his faceplate for a moment, letting me see his expression. "May I ask you a question, Major?"

"Shoot."

"Why do you trust your source so much? You have to know that he's the prime suspect as to who painted you a target yesterday."

I did realize that, but I still didn't think it'd been Matthew. Just because I couldn't think of anyone else who'd want me dead didn't automatically mean it was him. "It's...complicated, Lieutenant."

He flashed me a sardonic grin. "Isn't it always?" Then he slung the sniper rifle behind his back. "Anyway. I'll get the intel you need, ma'am. Talk to you soon."

As the ONI operative walked away, a sudden feeling of restlessness came over me. For all the years of combat experience I had under my belt now, for all the years I'd spent in the Marines, I'd never fought a war like this - one where you never truly knew who your real enemies might be, and those who wished you harm hid in the shadows rather than face you up front, following you at every turn.

Lately, I found myself thinking more and more about what Hayden had said to me back on Earth before we'd left for Khan. His words echoed in my head now. "Don't you miss the Covies and the Flood?"

I never thought I would. But I was coming to find now that no matter the odds, it was better to know exactly who you were fighting and what you were up against than try to puzzle it out as you go. So far, this had been the most frustrating deployment I'd ever been on.

### 31. Chapter 30: Hiding in Plain Sight

\*\*Chapter Thirty: Hiding in Plain Sight\*\*

It was late in the evening by the time Willis got back from the ship. I was already in our quarters, lounging for a minute in just my T-shirt, dogtags, and battledress pants after yet another long day. I still felt sore in some places from the battle yesterday, too. But I sat up a bit as soon as I saw him come in.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey, Coop," he echoed, looking tired himself. He dropped his gear in the corner where I kept my weapons and immediately started stripping off his jacket.

I pushed myself up a little higher on the bed. "You should've let me know you were coming back soon. I would've waited for you to go to dinner together."

"It's okay. I ate in the mess on the ship." He flashed me a half-hearted grin. "Less chance of getting sniped up there." Willis set his jacket down on the back of the chair near the desk, then sat down in it to pull off his boots. He gave me a look as he did so. "So it sounds like you've been holding out on me, Cooper."

My heart leapt into my throat for a second, wondering if he somehow already knew - if maybe he'd come across Matthew in the woods just now and had found out I'd known his brother was here all along. But then I watched his face for a moment, and I realized he was talking about something entirely different. Slowly, I relaxed again.

"The rebs aren't our only problem down here, are they?" he asked me then.

I shook my head. "Nope. Unfortunately, we've got plenty more homicidal enemies to go around. You can take your pick." I took in a deep breath. "Those snipers I was telling you about, that I think are after me? They're actually Jackals. I killed a few myself yesterday. But I don't know yet if they're working independently for some bizarre reason of their own, or if they were hired or supplied by the rebs. That's one of the things I asked the spook about today."

"What else did you ask him?"

"To find out about the weapons they're using. They're not firing the S2-AMs we should be seeing out here. They're 99-S5s."

"Shit. How could they be - "

"I don't know," I said, anticipating his question. "But the answer could change things. Right now, there's too many ifs floating around to properly move forward. I just want something concrete to fire my rifle at and stick my knife into." And I hope it won't have to be another person, I added silently to myself.

Willis let out a sigh. "That's fair." He leaned forward in his chair then, rubbing his hands together. I hadn't noticed it before now, but his gesture was the mirror image of his brother's the night I'd found Matthew. It was interesting to see. "Well, I guess you called it, Coop. This mission's turning out to be exactly as messed up as you thought it would be."

A small smirk appeared on my face. "It's not always nice to be right. And that's still not all, you know."

"Uh...it's not?"

"I wish. The spook brought something else to our attention a week ago, too."

"What's that?"

"There's a unit of Storm troops on an island off the coast near here. Sounds like they've been staking out some turf by an old ruin. Interestingly, it's also something the Covies were after during the war. It's the reason this half of Khan was spared in the glassing."

My husband contemplated the new information for a while. Then he said, "So that Storm ship we fought when we were four days out from Khan..."

I shrugged. "Could be connected. The spook thinks so. Maybe they were bringing in troops, or supplies, or taking something back that they found in the ruins..." Finally, I sighed. "Whatever it was, we'll never know now. It's all a bunch of wreckage out in space."

"Damn. Well, we've definitely got our work cut out for us, then." He ran his hand over his short hair. "I guess we won't be going home anytime soon, either."

I heard the undertone of sadness in his voice, and it dampened my tone as well. "Yeah. I guess not."

"I really miss the kids, Natalie."

"Me, too, Will."

He looked dispirited for a minute before he suddenly glanced up again and smiled at me. "But at least I've got you."

I smiled in return. "That you do."

Willis stood then and moved to where I was sitting on the bed, his grin widening as he crawled over me. I grinned, too, and let myself sink down underneath him.

My heart fluttered in my chest when he leaned down to kiss me. I took his head in my hands and kissed him back. It always amazed me that even after all these years, he still made me feel things no one else could, just like I did him.

I loved my husband with all my heart. And it was the reason why I hated myself so much for what I'd been keeping from him the past several days.

Tonight, I felt a little better, though - because tonight, I'd finally get to talk to Matthew and get this all resolved. In the morning, I was going to tell Willis, explain my reasoning to him, and hopefully it would all go smoothly and blow over by the next day. Or at least, that's what the optimist in me said.

Right now, though, I wasn't paying too much attention to anything other than Willis. When we finally came up for air, we were both grinning ear to ear.

"I really missed you the past couple weeks, Coop," he said.

"I missed you, too, Will. So much." I pulled him closer again. "I'm glad you're here now."

\* \* \*

><p>Much later, I woke with a start in the middle of night, my heart pounding hard in my chest while a thin sheen of sweat covered my forehead. I was feeling extremely anxious and agitated, but I couldn't figure out why. It took me a moment to realize it must've been from a nightmare I'd just had. I sat up carefully in bed then, aware of Willis snoring lightly beside me, and took in a deep, calming breath.</p>

I hadn't had a reaction this bad in years. For a moment I felt physically sick until the nausea subsided. After that, I swallowed hard and did all I could to get out of bed without waking my husband. My pulse had finally stopped racing by then, but it'd already freaked me out. I stood and braced my hands against my desk in the dark, wondering why the hell I'd felt so bad.

When I'd recovered enough, I turned back to my nightstand and picked up one of my bottles of pills. I stood there staring at the label for a long time, as if it'd been its fault that I was feeling like this. In a way, I supposed it was, but I also knew that it'd managed to shield me from the worst of my symptoms for many years now. I wondered why tonight had been different.

Was it because I was worried about everything we were facing? Was it because of the huge discovery I was keeping from Willis? Or was my condition somehow getting worse now, spurred by a new deployment and the new combat situations I was in? I didn't know. I couldn't know. It was possible it might've been all three. All I knew was that there was nothing I could do about it while on the ground.

So I did what I always did: I sucked it up. I took in one last deep breath; then, satisfied that Willis was still asleep, I went back to the desk and checked my watch. It was time to meet up with Matt - past time. Ironically, I'd been lucky I woke up from the dream. Carefully and quietly, I started to get dressed, and soon I was back out in the darkness of the forest around the outpost.

Everything seemed more disturbing now after the nightmare. I still didn't remember what it'd been thanks to the pills, but the way I'd felt when I'd woken up was still very fresh in my mind - and that was what bothered me most. I let out a sigh in the dark.

Come on, Cooper, I thought to myself then. Get over it. Focus on what's in front of you now. You don't want to show up back to Columbia in a body bag.

That's wasn't my idea of a good night. Tightening my grip on my DMR, I forced myself to pay more attention to my surroundings, lit up in the faint green glow of my HUD's night vision. It didn't take me long to hear the telltale crackle of dry leaves underfoot up ahead. I paused to crouch, gun held at the ready. But it was only Matthew who emerged from the shadows, as always.

I lowered my weapon and stood. "Hey, kid."

"Hi, Nat."

"You sound exhausted."

"I am. It's...been a weird day."

I snorted. "Tell me about it."

"Yeah," he said with a chuckle. Then his expression changed. "So you wanted to see me? I was surprised when I got your message yesterday. You said not to meet you here anymore because you were afraid Will would - "

I stopped him there. "I figured this would be best. We've been called off the build site now because of the fighting the other day, and I'm not so worried about your brother anymore."

Matthew raised an eyebrow. "Why not?"

"Matt, listen. This has been going on long enough. And let's be honest, it's really helped no one so far. You've been put in harm's way, and me...it's been eating me up bad, just like I knew it would. I just can't do it anymore. You have to tell."

A look of puzzlement came across his face then, rather than the anger I was expecting. "But...I got you the information you wanted. Natalie, you said you'd help me with this."

"Well, I did. I have for as long as I've been able to stand it. But it's time now, kiddo. Your brother needs to know you're alive, and I want you safe, with us. You need to tell him in the morning. Or I will."

The ultimatum wasn't received with the tantrum I'd been expecting; maybe Matthew had reached the same conclusion in the last day. Seeing how badly things could've gone yesterday had changed both our minds, it seemed. And that was a good thing. I felt relieved.

"So what do you say?" I pressed.

Eventually, my brother-in-law shrugged. "What can I say to that?" He sucked in a deep breath. "Okay, Nat. I'll do it. He deserves to hear it from me. And you're right. I haven't helped you out as much as I could have. I'm sorry."

"Hey," I said then. "It's not your fault. I shouldn't have agreed to putting you in that position to begin with." I gave him a small grin. "Sometimes you're too convincing for your own good. It was easy to forget you're still just a kid."

"I'm grown up now, Nat. Not a little boy. I'm a man, not a kid."

I chuckled. "All right. You're a man. But still a very young one." I stuck out my hand. "Should we call a truce?"

He stared at it a moment before taking it. "Yeah. Sure."

"So we're agreed to tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"Good." I hefted my rifle in my hands. "In that case, I should be getting back now. You should, too. And do it carefully."

"Okay."

It was as we were both turning to go that we suddenly heard a noise behind us. Matthew and I turned in unison, rifles raised. Without thinking about it, I crept forward a little, shielding my brother-in-law behind me.

"Who's there?" I yelled out, pulse rushing in my ears. "Show yourself, now."

There was absolute silence for a minute before a figure emerged from the shadows. He was dressed in fatigues like me, and held a submachine gun in his hands. He lowered it though as he approached.

Then, suddenly, he was standing before me. I recognized who it was even before he lifted his faceplate.

I didn't need my night vision to see his expression this up close. He was fuming, his hazel eyes burning with controlled anger.

"Natalie," Willis ground out between his teeth, "what the fuck is going on here?"

### 32. Chapter 31: In the Doghouse

\*\*Chapter Thirty-One: In the Doghouse\*\*

Willis's stance was as tense as his words as he stood in front of me, the barrel of his gun pointed low but his tone heated. I could still see his eyes blazing in the green-lit glow of my night vision.

"Cooper, I'm going to ask you again. What are you doing talking to a reb in the middle of the damn night?"

For my part, I'd already slung my own rifle behind my back, but I still held out my hands to placate my husband. "Will, you need to take a step back and calm - "

"Don't tell me to calm down, Natalie! You have to know how bad this looks! What the hell is happening here?"

I finally let out a snort and chuckled. I couldn't help myself. Willis thought I was somehow aiding the enemy...not trying to do right by his baby brother. I couldn't quite be upset that he didn't trust me given what I'd kept from him recently, but to have him think that this was what I was up to hurt. Behind me, Matthew still hadn't said a word.

Willis narrowed his eyes at me. "What's so funny?"

"That you think that after all these years I've been faithfully serving the Corps, and all the bullshit I've gone through personally here on Khan lately, that I'd be betraying anything to the rebs that are trying to kill me," I answered. "Actually, it's been the complete opposite."

My husband finally backed down an inch. "He's working for you?"

"Yes. Or he was, at least."

Willis suddenly seemed distressed. "Oh, shit. That...that makes much more sense." I heard him blow out a sharp breath. "\_Dammit\_. Natalie, I'm sorry. I - shit. I feel like an asshole."

"Under different circumstances, I'd tell you you should," I replied. Then I released a rueful sigh. "But this time, it's me who fucked up, Will. So don't apologize to me just yet."

"What do you mean?"

I turned back to Matthew then. "Come on, kiddo. Don't be shy. Your big brother's not going to bite."

"Big broth - ?"

The words weren't even out of Willis's mouth when Matthew stepped forward in the dark. It wasn't the reunion I'd been hoping for for the two brothers, not quite what I wanted for Willis after all the years I knew he'd spent suffering and blaming himself for Matthew's death. But it was better than no reunion at all. Despite the surroundings and the poor light, I knew this still meant a lot to both of them.

Willis just stared at his brother for a long time. I could tell by the glistening in his eyes though that he recognized him.

"Holy shit. Matt?" he finally asked.

Matthew nodded and, slowly, a small grin formed on his face. "Yup. It's me, Will. Been a while, huh?"

My husband chuckled nervously. "Heh. Yeah." Then his own smile went wide. "Well, don't just stand there, little brother. Come here."

Willis took another step forward without waiting for Matt and wrapped him in tight bear hug. I could hear both of them laughing after a moment, and I smiled in the dark. It wasn't perfect, but it felt right.

"Oh, my God, Matt!" Willis said as he continued to hold onto his brother hard. "We thought you were dead, man! For twelve years. You don't know how - " I heard him swallow. "Anyway, how the hell are you even here? Where've you been all this time? How did no one know - "

I could see that Matthew was just about to reply when my husband's eyes suddenly darted back to me. His ecstatic expression changed instantly and darkened, his tone going hard with it.

"Cooper? How long he has been here? How long have you known?"

The gig was up. If I lied now, I'd only make it worse for myself. It was time to bite the bullet and face what I'd done. "Almost as long as I've been groundside," I confessed quietly. "I found him during a

skirmish we had the night after we landed. Or rather, he found me."

Silence reigned as Willis processed the information. It was a long while before I finally saw him nodding, in that feigned calm way people did while they tried to keep from exploding.

"Right. So you've known almost two weeks now," he ground out. He turned on me fully then, looking me straight in the eyes. "Two weeks you've known my brother was alive. And you didn't say a damn word about it to me."

"Will, there's some things you don't know about - "

Willis let out a bitter laugh, cutting me off. "Really? You think? I just found that out, Natalie. Thanks for stating the obvious."

I was getting angry, too, now, because he wasn't listening. "That's not what I meant, Willis."

"Well, guess what? I don't give a shit what you meant. In fact, I don't want to hear another damn thing you have to say," he retorted, eyes blazing with hate. "I want to talk to my brother now, alone. So leave."

Although I'd always known it'd be bad, I wasn't quite prepared for the sharp stab of pain his words caused. He was truly angry with me; I'd never seen him this mad before about anything. I couldn't say I blamed him, but it still made me feel like total crap to be on the receiving end of it. I stood my ground a moment longer, trying to keep my face impassive all the while, before I finally turned on my heel and walked away.

"I knew it," I muttered sharply under my breath. "I fucking knew this would happen."

I'd known, and yet I'd still agreed to it. And now, I had to deal with the possibility that my marriage would suffer for it...maybe irreparably. I'd done this to save my Marines, but in the end, the only thing I'd managed to do was screw myself over.

I tried to tell myself that the tears welling up in my eyes were angry ones - anger at Willis for not even stopping to listen to what I had to say. Anger at him for getting so mad at me. But I knew better. It was hard to fool yourself. They were tears of sadness. Tears of hurt.

When I finally got back to our room, I jerked my helmet off my head and threw it so hard against the ground I heard it crack. But in the moment, I couldn't care any less. Watching my helmet shatter was nothing in comparison to feeling my heart do the same. I slumped against the wall, DMR still slung on my back, and slid to the floor. Then I wrapped my hands around my knees as the tears finally spilled out.

Love wasn't always the pretty thing the vids made it out to be.

Sometimes, it hurt so bad it felt like it was ripping you apart from the inside.

\* \* \*

><p>Nothing made you feel unwelcome like catching zees on a cot in your own quarters.</p>

That's how I awoke the next morning, eyes burning from lack of sleep and head throbbing in pain - the kind that felt a lot like a migraine. I rubbed at my eyes first, then my head, spending the next few seconds wondering why I felt so bad. Why there was a tightness in my chest I couldn't place. Then I remembered.

I glanced over at the bed in silence. Willis was still in it, sleeping soundly. I figured it must be early, but probably close enough to the time I needed to be up, so I rose quietly. I winced as I realized I felt sore in new places on my body today. Thanks to the cot, I thought. Those things had always been way too rough to sleep on.

I looked at Willis again and sighed. I'd probably be seeing a lot more of the cot than I liked in the coming days, if last night had been anything to go by.

As I dressed and geared up, I did my best not wake my husband. More than being courteous, I was trying not to awaken the wrath that was sure to come with him. I frowned as I walked over to the corner to pick up my helmet, evidence of my own wrath from the night before - there was now a large crack down the middle of the outer plating.

Modern helmets were able to withstand a lot of impact, so the hard shell hadn't been damaged, but any breakage obviously put the wearer more at risk. I decided that if I was sniped, though, it wouldn't make a difference anyway, and it'd still hold up in a regular fight. So I held onto it. I was just about to slip it on over my head when Willis woke up.

I turned to face him when I heard him stir, and our eyes met from across the room. He blinked sleepily at me for a moment before coming to total awareness, then made sure to shoot me a glare before shoving his head back in his pillow. I shook my head, walking over to the desk now to set my helmet down on it.

"Willis."

No answer.

"Willis."

Still nothing. I let out a sigh.

"Will," I said softly, taking a risk by coming up closer to the bed now. "You never let me explain."

"Explain what, Natalie?" my husband bit back then, still not getting up. "That you knew my dead brother was alive and didn't fucking tell me?"

I folded my arms across my chest, frowning again. "Well, when you say it like that, it sounds a lot worse than what it is."

"Good. Because that's exactly what happened. And I don't want to hear whatever twisted reasoning you may have for doing it."

It was my turn to be angry now. Some of the hurt I was feeling last night crept back into my words. "I didn't know Matthew was here, either, Willis, until he decked me in the face the night I found him. I talked to him for a long time after that, asked him why he was here, why he was with the rebels, why he never called home."

Willis snorted. "I already know all that. He told me everything himself last night."

"Then he must've also told you about the deal he made with me," I replied. Running a hand through my hair, I took in a deep breath and continued. "I did everything I could to talk him out of it, I swear. I rejected the idea more times than I can count, because I knew what it would do to you. You don't think I know how much this means to you? All those years you were beating yourself up over Matthew's death, I was there with you. By your side, every step of the way. I even agreed to name our firstborn son after him. That was for you, Willis."

My husband finally sat up to face me, his face still contorted with anger and indignation...and a hint of pained confusion. "Then why do this to me now, Natalie, huh? How could you do this, knowing what you did about how I felt? Tell me, how?"

I sighed a little shakily this time as emotions started getting the better of me. I hoped I could make him see. "Willis, he wasn't ready for all this yet - seeing you again, telling everyone he was alive and a reb and had been living here all these years. And I told you yesterday all the shit we were facing on this planet. I'd already planned on telling Matthew no when we had that briefing with the spook. Matthew said he knew a way to keep everyone safe - you, myself, and my Marines - while staying below the radar himself. As long as I didn't say anything to you yet. How could I say no that?" I paused, then said, "I had to at least look into the possibility, for all our sakes. I have five hundred men and women under my command, Will. Not just you to worry about."

Willis continued to glare. "Then I guess you've finally made your choice."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Duty over honor, right? And your Marines over your own damn husband."

I stepped up even closer then, anger thick in my tone now as my voice went low. "Don't you dare put me in that position, Willis. You know damn well I'd do anything for you, just as I'd do anything for them. I've never shown you otherwise. Ever."

"Except now, by not telling me my brother was alive."

Our eyes met again and I saw the deep-seated hurt lying in his. I wondered if he could see mine, too. Finally, I straightened, knowing for sure now that this wasn't going to be resolved just yet. I swallowed hard on the lump in my throat as I turned to go.

"I'm sorry, Will," I said quietly. "I really am, for whatever that's worth. I wasn't going to keep you in the dark forever. Just while we tried to get a handle on this massive clusterfuck we've found ourselves in."

\* \* \*

><p>It was hard to get on with the rest of the day with something like this looming over my head, but I did my best. When I got to the mess, I sat down by myself with a full tray and a steaming cup of coffee, but did little except pick at my food. I was still engrossed in shifting my scrambled eggs from one side of the plate to the other when my best friend walked up.</p>

"Damn," Major Hayden said with his usual grin. "You look like you've had a rough night, Cooper. Did you get any sleep at all?"

"Not much," I grumbled. "And why on earth are you smiling at that?"

Slowly, Hayden's smile receded. He sat down beside me. "I don't know. I guess I figured with your husband back - "

"That we'd be having ourselves a grand old time?" I sighed in dejection. "Yeah. That lasted for all of two days. More like a day and a half."

"Uh-oh. I know that look. Trouble in paradise?"

I ran a hand over my face and found myself unable to look my friend in the eye when I replied. "I fucked up bad, Oliver. Really bad, and I don't know if Willis is going to forgive me for this."

"You didn't cheat, did you?"

I gave him a look, and he quickly held up his hands in surrender.

"Okay. You're right. I'm sorry. I know you'd never do that, but you said it was bad so I had to ask."

"I'm waiting for some friendly advice on what to do, unless you have more false judgments coming down the pipeline."

"Nope. Just the one." He looked down at his boots for moment before he went on, a little more serious this time. "Well, I've been in the hot seat before - quite a few times, actually - so I'll give you some advice. Wait it out."

Somehow, I found myself disappointed in his grand wisdom. I frowned. "That's it? Wait it out?"

"Well, you know, do all the usual stuff, too," Hayden clarified. "Apologize. Beg. Plead. But after that, sometimes you just have to give it some time. Remember the old adage, 'time heals all wounds'. Willis needs to come to terms with the fact that you screwed up, and he needs to work out for himself how he feels about that. Then if you've apologized, and he knows you didn't do whatever it was intentionally, and that you still love him, didn't want to hurt him,

etc etc, there's the possibility he'll come around."

I raised an eyebrow at my friend. "'Possibility'? Christ, Oliver. This is my marriage we're talking about. I need a little more certainty than that."

"Fine." He slapped the back of my shoulder in reassurance. "He'll come around, Natalie. I'm sure of it. Really, don't beat yourself up too much. No one's marriage is perfect. We're all still human beings after all, and bumps in the road are to be expected." He winked at me. "Even if only once every ten years."

I snorted. "If we make it to our twentieth anniversary, then, I hope I never have to feel like this a second time."

### 33. Chapter 32: One Mistake Too Many

\*\*Chapter Thirty-Two: One Mistake Too Many\*\*

\*\*\*\*\*1356 Hours, January 2, 2558. UNSC Outpost Columbia, Planet Khan. "The Long Road Back," Outer Colonies. Day Sixteen of the New Age of Warfare\*\*\*\*\*

The words Willis had said to me that morning ended up being the last ones I heard out of him all week. It was four days later now, and he hadn't so much as uttered a peep at me. We'd even spent the New Year's celebration apart. This was the longest we'd ever gone without speaking to one another after a fight, and it had me worried.

So much for Hayden's "wait and see" policy. I wanted to give Willis his space after what happened, but it felt like the longer this festered, the worse it got - not better. And I was becoming far more acquainted with the cot than I'd ever wanted to be. Sometimes, when I grew frustrated enough, a part of me wanted to protest to Willis that the bed was rightfully mine, since I'd been assigned our quarters because of my rank. But I knew that was childish, and I didn't want to get into a petty argument with him when we were already doing pretty bad on the other, bigger issue: Matt.

I sighed then and gently patted the letter I'd been working on the past two days, hidden safely in the breast pocket of my uniform jacket for now until it was ready for its big reveal. It was a rather archaic form of communication now, but it was the only way I could think of to get through to Willis since he wasn't talking to me. Likely, if I sent him anything electronically, he'd just delete it before reading. And I couldn't take all the silence much longer.

It was hard enough going back to my quarters every night to find him there, physically present, but already asleep and inaccessible anyway. I'd finally figured nothing was going to change if talks didn't start up again. So this was my last-ditch attempt. I hoped it'd work.

For now, though, I had some other business to attend to. Maybe because of the holiday, the lines around Outpost Columbia had actually been pretty quiet lately. Plans for the assault on the rebel HQ were still being worked on, but there were a couple of loose ends we were still waiting on our spook for before it launched - which was fine by me, as I'd had more than enough to keep me preoccupied

recently.

Navy Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd was exactly who I was going to see now. As usual, I met the ONI operative outside against orders in the same alcove as before. It'd worked out well enough the last time, so I just held onto my rifle across my middle, barrel pointed down, and made sure I kept my wits about me as we spoke.

"Major," he said to me in greeting. I nodded at him in return and he went on, his expression becoming sly. "So I've found out some interesting information since we last met. I know who's after you now, ma'am. As well as what's going on with those new rifles the Jackals've got."

I made a sweeping gesture with my DMR. "Well, by all means, Lieutenant."

"Yes, ma'am. It looks like the mayor of our little city here has taken undue interest in you. Somehow, you managed to climb to the top of Javier Laraza's hitlist. He's the one who contracted you out."

I was expecting that to surprise me, but a lot of ways it didn't. None of our meetings had been as friendly as Colonel Dwight would've liked, and especially after the bomb I'd found on our build site, I'd let Laraza have it. I could see why he'd want me dead, given that he was - at least in a subtle way - in league with the local insurgents. But there was one angle I still couldn't figure out. "Okay," I said. "But can I ask an unpleasant question? Why me instead of Major Hayden? He's the one in charge of their real threat - our infantry battalion." Not that I wanted my friend hurt instead of me, but I was curious.

"That's pretty easy, ma'am," the lieutenant replied. "Mayor Laraza met you, not the other major. So you were the easiest one to paint as a target. And ironically, I think all your efforts at a peaceful coexistence may have rubbed him the wrong way. He just wants you out of the picture now, and a full-out fight against the Marines left. He wants all of us gone, Major. Off Khan."

I snorted. "Does he know about the Storm troops on the island?"

"I don't know, ma'am."

"Because he might change his mind when he sees hostile aliens on his turf again." Shaking my head, I added, "He has to learn that the UNSC isn't just conveniently available whenever a major threat strikes that the rebels are unable to counter alone. He can't shit where he eats and not expect repercussions."

Lloyd shrugged. "I'm just here to relay info, ma'am. The rest is up to you, and Major Hayden, and Colonel Dwight."

I let out a sigh. "Right. So what else did you dig up? What's the story on that rifle?"

"The local rebels somehow managed to scrounge a few from Marine stockpiles here before our units arrived on-planet," Lloyd imparted. "They were stolen. But once the insurgents had them, the Jackal arms dealers were obviously very keen to own the weapons themselves. There was a deal struck. If the Jackals helped the rebels in fighting us off

of Khan, they'd get to keep the 99-S5s." He shifted a bit. "And...a special bonus goes to the Jackal that kills you."

"That's nice," I commented dryly. "At least I'm making someone happy these days."

The spook cocked his head to the side, perplexed.  
"Ma'am?"

"Nevermind, Lieutenant." I thought for a moment about what he'd just said, wondering how this helped us now. Maybe it didn't, but at least I knew the who, how, and why now. It was a start. "All right. Great work as always, Lloyd. Go ahead and bring the colonel up to speed if you haven't already. I'll see you at the next briefing."

Lieutenant Lloyd nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

\* \* \*

><p>I wandered around the outpost for a while checking up on my Marines before I decided to go visit Matthew. Willis had spent almost all of his free time with his brother lately, so I hadn't seen the kid much myself. For now, though, I knew that my husband was out on a supply run to the <em>Suave Affair</em> at the moment - not that he'd told me that himself, but I'd seen it from the duty rosters. Willis was due back in less than an hour, so I knew I had little time. But I wanted to talk to my brother-in-law just the same, to see how he was settling in.

I found Matthew in a small storage room Colonel Dwight had allowed to be converted into temporary quarters for him after Willis had spoken to the colonel about it. The story of his little brother's survival was just crazy enough that Dwight had believed it. So in lieu of other options, Matthew remained here now, with us - much to mine as well as Willis's great relief. I snorted to myself at that, though. It was probably the only thing we presently both agreed on.

Knocking on the door first, Matthew quickly allowed me inside. "Nat. What brings you here?"

"Nothing much. Just wanted to see how you were doing these past few days. Everything going okay with your brother so far?"

Matthew grinned. "Yeah. It's been great, actually. You were right. I should've just done this from the start. Told him I was here, I mean."

I gave him a look. "You would've saved me a lot of trouble, you know."

"Is he still not talking to you?"

"Nope." I sat down on the floor with him in the tight space and put my head in my hands. "I'm getting very close to declaring our marriage dead and gone, Matt."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry too much. It's only been four days."

"That's an eternity for us, kiddo." I sighed. "This is the first time in our thirteen years together that I've seen him like this."

My brother-in-law frowned then. "I'm sorry, Natalie. I tried to put in a good word for you, told him the whole thing was my idea and that you tried to talk me out of it, but I insisted. He just got mad at that though and said you should've insisted back."

"I tried to," I said lamely.

"I know that, but he doesn't. Well, he does, but he's...he can be stubborn sometimes when it comes to family. To the people he loves."

I actually found myself smiling at that. "I know. That's how we first got together, all those years ago. He was trying to protect me from someone who was hurting me really bad, and he just wouldn't have it anymore."

"What happened?"

I shook my head at him. I hadn't thought of Ethan in many years, and I wasn't going to restart now. It'd been too long ago and was irrelevant now. And still something private that I liked to keep between Willis and I. "Nothing good. But your brother was the one who got me out of it. That's when I fell in love with him. And I've never stopped."

Somehow, I realized then that the ground was starting to get blurry. It took me a moment to realize they were tears forming in my eyes. Again. I wiped them away with my uniform sleeve and sniffled, but didn't let them fall. Then I looked back up at Matthew. He was staring back at me with a sorrowful expression on his face, so pained I had to chuckle to keep from crying again.

"I was only a year older than you are now when I married Will, you know. We were both just twenty back then, but I already knew he was the one for me. The one I wanted to be with for the rest of my life." My eyes blurred a second time, and I wasn't quick enough to swipe the tears away. A couple fell before I got a handle on myself again. "It hasn't all been pretty. We've had our ups and downs, like everyone else - especially when we lost the baby. But we got through everything together, Matt. Always." I finally choked back a sob. "I can't live without him."

Matthew reached out and gripped my shoulder. "Nat, it's going to be okay. I promise. My brother will get his head out his ass soon enough and forgive you. I know it. He loves you, too, you know. A lot. I've seen the way he looks at you, even now that he's mad at you." He smiled then. "He just doesn't want to admit it yet, or let you off the hook that easy. But I know he wants you back, too."

"You think so?"

"Yeah. Just give it a little more time."

That was the second time I'd heard that advice. And yeah, this time, it was coming from a nineteen-year-old kid, barely old enough to hold the rifle he was used to toting around. But right now, I had to admit, he was a lot more level-headed about this than I was. I started to hope that he was right.

\* \* \*

><p>Later that evening, rather than spend the night restless in my quarters in a cot getting the stink eye from my husband whenever I even remotely glanced in his direction, I decided to head up top to the observation platforms surrounding the outpost. I needed some fresh air, and all the last few days of anxious waiting for <em>something</em> to happen had taken their toll. I wanted to check out what was going on, if anything, for myself. And to see if I might be able to get a glimpse of some of those snipers I knew were still out there - gunning for me.

I took all the necessary precautions - I was old enough and experienced enough to know to equip myself with everything I'd need out here. I had on all my armor, my helmet, my DMR slung behind my back, my pistol in its holster on my hip, my two combat knives sheathed on my person. I was ready.

And yet, much like my marriage to Willis, sometimes even after ten years, some things could still surprise you.

It started out as a glint in the light of the moon I'd noticed while looking through the trees with my field binoculars. None of Hayden's Marines manning the platforms beside me realized, because none of them raised any sort of alarm or warning, either. And I was too distracted - still thinking about Willis, and my talk with Matthew, and even my conversation with Lloyd earlier - to pay enough attention. I didn't even know what I thought the glint might be until I felt it.

Something suddenly ripped into my left shoulder from the back, straight through my armor, and I heaved forward, trying to keep my footing as sharp pain shot through my upper body like lightning. A spray of blood marked the ground in front of me now, and, still in shock, I reached over with my right hand and touched the spot on my shoulder. It came away red and sticky with blood.

I never saw the sniper that shot me in the back. But just a fraction of a second later, another bullet tore into me, and I screamed.

This time, it felt like liquid fire had enveloped my chest. As I fell in the next moment, I saw that the pool of blood in front of me now was much, much larger than it'd been before. I heard Marines start to scramble towards me, while others tried to fire back at the sharpshooter.

But for me, it was too late. I lay there on the ground on the platform, gaping like a fish, my chest filled with flame and unable to breathe. I thought of Willis, and my letter to him in my breast pocket that I still hadn't finished, and I thought of our kids.

And then everything went black.

#### 34. Chapter 33: Heart of the Matter

\*\*Chapter Thirty-Three: Heart of the Matter\*\*

Willis was very close to dozing off when he suddenly heard a frantic knocking on the door to his quarters. At first he grumbled to himself

and ignored it, thinking it was Cooper come back from wherever she'd gone - but then he realized that if it'd only been his wife, she would've just walked in. Slowly, something resembling apprehension started to grip him. He swallowed the feeling down, though, wondering why his mind went straight to what might've gone wrong, and why he should even care after what Natalie had done. He quickly pulled on his uniform pants over his boxers and answered the door.

Despite what the angry part of him said, he still felt his heart drop into his stomach when he was greeted with the sight of an enlisted Marine in full gear - and covered in blood. The captain's eyes went wide.

"Sergeant, what - "

"Sir, it's your wife," the Marine said without preamble. "Major Cooper's been shot."

Hawk tasted bile in his throat, feeling like something physical had just bowled into him, but he forced his mind to work as he reeled from the news. "Where is she?"

"On her way to the medical wing, sir," the Marine answered. "Doc's got her on a stretcher, Captain. She's critical."

Willis didn't waste anymore time on questions. He had to go see her, now.

As he rapidly shoved on his boots and ran out after the sergeant, Captain Hawk tried to keep himself from panicking. He tried to tell himself that he'd been here many times before, and that Cooper had always made it through things like this in the past. But still, he knew in his heart that this time was different.

It was different because he hadn't spoken to her in four days now - the longest they'd ever gone without talking to each other. And the last words he'd said to her were filled with anger, and hurt, and meant to cut her deep. As much as she had him when he'd realized she'd found Matthew alive here on Khan, and hadn't said a word about something that huge to him the instant she knew.

He'd listened to her excuses. He'd listened to his brother tell the same tale, too, and it all added up. Somewhere in the back of his mind, beneath the outrage, he knew Natalie hadn't done it with malicious intent. He knew that she'd thought all along that she was doing it for the best, at least in regards to her Marines. But he'd been selfish and had gotten angry at her for not thinking of him first.

This was his baby brother they'd been dealing with, whose death Cooper had known had crushed Willis and his family in many ways, over several very long years. She was in the wrong for concealing his survival no matter what, and she knew it herself, too. But Willis had purposely given her the impression that he wasn't just mad at her - but that he no longer cared about her. That he didn't want to talk to her, or see her, or even have her anywhere near him anymore. It was only now that he realized that that might be the very last impression she'd had of him as she lay dying.

Hawk choked on a sob as he ran. He had to get to her, had to see her,

had to tell her that that wasn't the case. He was still hurt, but he also still cared. He still loved her. And he definitely didn't want her to die.

\_Hang on, Coop,\_ he thought in anguish. \_Please, just hang on. I'm coming.\_

He finally got to the medical wing just as Doc Reynolds and another medic raced in to place Cooper, unconscious and bloody in a litter carried between them, on a sterile hospital bed.

Willis's heart felt like it stopped when he saw all the blood. It was seeping out of one of her shoulders and her chest, and her upper armor and uniform jacket were positively soaked in the stuff. Even the large, thick gauze pads Reynolds had just shoved over her wounds to stem the bleeding were already saturated with red.

Hawk found that his mouth was working independently of his mind now as he watched the sudden flurry of activity in the wing. "What the hell happened to her?" he asked no one in particular, his voice catching in his throat.

"Sniper, sir," Doc Reynolds answered hastily as he hooked Cooper up to tubes and wires and an IV bag, while the other medic, a female, switched out the bloody bandages for new ones and pressed them hard against Natalie's wounds.

"Why aren't you putting biofoam in?" Willis shouted to them. "She'll bleed out!"

"Because we still need to take the bullets out first, sir," Reynolds replied in a curt tone.

Willis watched in a sort of daze as the two medics struggled to keep his wife just this side of death. And in the meantime, Hawk was beside himself on the inside, wondering how the hell this could have happened, and why it had to happen now, after he'd spent the last four days giving her the coldest of shoulders. Although Natalie had indeed done something very wrong, she didn't deserve this.

Suddenly the monitors kicked in, and Willis listened intently to the sounds. He didn't realize they'd actually been going the whole time until the slow but steady thump thump of Cooper's heart changed to a single constant, horrible tone.

"She's flatlined!" Reynolds shouted.

Hawk felt his own heart clench. "Then do something!"

"I am!" The medic let out an explosive sigh of frustration and gestured to the two MPs standing in the corner, his gloved hands drenched up to his wrists in Natalie's blood. "Get the captain out of here! Now! We need space to work!"

"Like hell," Willis ground out, but he soon found himself being shoved roughly outside the medical wing and into the hallway. Angrily he jerked out of the MPs' grip, but then, instead of fighting back, he just dragged both his hands over his short hair in agitation.

"Shit. She's going to die, isn't she?"

"Doc's doing all he can, sir," one of the MPs answered.

"She needs to get up to the Affair, now. There's better facilities, doctors who can help - "

The other MP shook his head. "No, sir. Not until the patient's stabilized."

And from the inside, it sounded like Cooper was anything but. Hawk could still hear the awful noise, constant and never changing, still not the comforting thump thump it should be. It wasn't even a sporadic heartbeat. There was fucking nothing.

"Please," Willis implored. "You have to do something!"

Another voice came from down the hall then, male. "Willis? Is Natalie in there? How is she?"

Captain Hawk turned to see Major Oliver Hayden jog up, the worry written on his face, too. All Willis could do in reply to Hayden's question was shake his head. Then the major was within earshot of the sound himself. His face went pale.

"Oh, shit. Shit, shit, shit." Oliver turned to one of the MPs, eyes hard. "What happened to Major Cooper, Marine?"

"Sniper fire, sir. She took one to the shoulder and one through the back. Came out her chest."

"Goddamn," Hayden breathed.

They all listened in anxious silence then as the constant tone from the monitor continued to sound. It felt like a lifetime went by until finally, five whole minutes later, the noise changed.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

It was simple, but the greatest thing Willis had ever heard. He wanted to run back in to see his wife right away, to be by her side while all this was going on, but the MPs both shot him a warning look as if they'd just read his mind. Hawk understood then that he wouldn't be allowed back in until Doc Reynolds gave the okay.

It made him feel incredibly helpless. He sat down heavily on one of the three plastic chairs in the corridor. Major Hayden took a seat beside him.

"Willis."

Hawk glanced over at Natalie's best friend, and the major smiled at him in reassurance.

"Did I ever tell you I was sniped in the head once?"

"No."

"Yup. Five years ago during the war. Beam rifle shot grazed my helmet and I went into a coma for a while. I'm pretty sure nobody thought I'd make it out." His smile widened. "And look at me now. Still here, still alive. Still breathing." He gripped Hawk's shoulder. "Your

wife's a tough cookie, Willis. She's going to make it out, too. I'm sure of it."

Willis took in a deep breath, emotion still permeating his words.  
"Fuck. I just - "

"You two've been fighting the last few days, and you don't want it to end like this," Hayden finished. "I know. She told me."

"What...what did she say?"

"Well, she hasn't been too happy about it, obviously." When Hawk didn't reply, the major released a sigh. "Look. She didn't tell me exactly what happened, and I suppose that's between you and her. But she did say it was bad, and I could tell she was real broken up about it. Whatever it was, I know she's the one who made a mistake. It's something she freely admitted to me herself, and she knew she was in the wrong. But even with that said, she loves you, Willis. More than anything other than your kids. I see it on her face every day. I saw it in Austria when we were fighting the Flood during the war, in Buenos Aires and Ecuador, in New Mombasa and Voi, back on Earth and here on Khan." He paused, then added, "Whatever it was she did, do you really think she did it on purpose to hurt you? Out of spite?"

Willis sat there quietly for a long time, his head in his hands now. He didn't want Hayden to see the tears clouding up his eyes. Cooper may have done something bad, but he'd been the one to drag it out, made sure he hurt her just as much in return. And now, she'd just come back from clinical death - and she still wasn't out of the woods yet. Not by a long shot. He might not get a chance to make this right. And that hurt most of all.

Hawk finally wiped at his eyes, now red, and then glanced up.

"No," he answered. "I don't."

"Then I think when she wakes up," Hayden said quietly, "and I know she will, you know what to do."

\* \* \*

><p>It was some time before Doc Reynolds finally emerged from the medical wing and out into the hall. His battledress was caked in dried blood here and there, and his hands were a dark pink color thanks to Cooper's blood saturating his gloves while he'd tended to her gunshot wounds. He let out a tired sigh, running a hand through his short, black hair. Willis stood up in the meantime, watching him intently, wondering what the medic would say.</p>

"Well?" Hawk asked. "How is she? How's my wife?"

"Stable, sir, but barely. We got very lucky. The bullet that went through her shoulder fractured her left scapula, but went straight through and didn't do much damage beyond that. The round that went through her back was tougher; it just nicked her heart so she had some internal bleeding, but it missed her lungs entirely. She went into cardiac arrest from the trauma for a few minutes, which I know you heard, but she's a trooper, and her pulse is steady now."

"Do you need me to take her up to the ship?"

Reynolds shook his head. "No, sir. Not now. We'll need to keep her dirtside and monitor what's going on with the major for the next twenty-four hours. She still hasn't woken up yet."

It was Willis's turn to sigh now, mostly out of relief. Cooper's wounds were bad, but not as bad as it could have been. At least she was still alive - for now. "It was the Jackals, wasn't it?"

"Most likely, yes, sir."

"Damn those bastards."

"There's something else, too, Captain."

"What?"

The medic reached into one of his cargo pockets and produced a red wad of paper. "Major Cooper had this on her person when she was hit. It's addressed to you."

It took Hawk a minute to realize it what it was; Cooper had written him a letter. Surprise - along with a generous amount of emotion - went through him. This was probably about their fight. He couldn't help the tears that welled up in his eyes again.

"Thank you," he muttered quietly.

"No problem, sir."

"When can I see her?"

"Soon. I'll come back out in a few minutes."

Nodding, Willis turned back to the letter. He was aware of Major Hayden still seated behind him, so he moved off to the side and sat down with his back to the wall to read.

He wiped at his eyes when he finally managed to unfold the half-wet, half-dry paper. Natalie's blood had smeared or completely soaked through almost the whole thing. The vast majority was illegible.

If she died now, he'd never know what she'd had to say.

But as the pain wracked his heart, he noticed that just a few of the lines were readable. Sprinkled throughout the letter, he made out the words, "I'm sorry," and "I love you." After a moment of sitting there staring at the letter, he realized those were the only ones that truly mattered anyway.

He was still looking down at the note when Reynolds emerged again. Captain Hawk glanced up.

"Sir, you can come in now." The medic faced Hayden then, too. "Sorry, Major. But only her husband for now."

Major Hayden nodded in understanding, and Willis stepped inside.

Placing the letter in his pants pocket as he walked up to his wife's bed, Hawk immediately sat in the chair now set up next her and took her hand. There were still tons of thin tubes leading to several bags of fluids, and the monitor, but a lot of the blood that had covered her face and chest had been cleaned up now. He listened to the rhythmic beating of her heart for a while, and then brought his head down to hers.

"I love you, too, Cooper," he said softly to her. "No matter what. Please, don't give up on me."

### 35. Chapter 34: Step in the Right Direction

#### \*\*Chapter Thirty-Four: A Step in the Right Direction\*\*

\*\*\*\*\*1801 Hours, January 5, 2558. UNSC Outpost Columbia, Planet Khan. "The Reconciliation," Outer Colonies. Day Nineteen of the New Age of Warfare\*\*\*\*\*

Intense pain was the first thing I felt when I regained conscious and became aware of my surroundings again. There was a deep burning in my chest still - like I'd been stabbed straight through it with a razor-sharp, white-hot knife. And my left shoulder was killing me. I groaned.

I took in a deep breath after that and found that even taking in oxygen hurt. But it was a little easier than I remembered. Slowly, I realized there was a respirator over my nose and mouth. And when I opened my eyes a crack to look around, I saw tens of small tubes all across my body, hooked up to various bags of fluid and machines.

\_Shit,\_ I thought. \_I must've been pretty bad.\_

I still couldn't remember what had happened, or how long I'd been out. I guess I'd have to wait for someone to show up and tell me. The medical wing, at least when I glanced over to my right, seemed strangely empty.

Then I looked over to my left and almost gasped in surprise. Willis was sitting there in a chair beside me, his head resting lightly against my arm as he slept. I didn't remember how I'd gotten wounded, but I did remember our lengthy fight beforehand, and I felt a lump start to form in my throat. He was here with me now, despite all that had happened, and all the days he'd just gone without speaking to me.

It gave me hope. And now that I was awake, I risked lifting my right arm up and gradually moved it over to run it gently through his short, golden brown hair. The motion took a fair amount of effort, as I still felt very weak and couldn't do much more than that at the moment, but it felt good, too.

Willis finally stirred himself then, and he blinked up at me with sleepy hazel eyes. But this time, instead of instantly shooting me a glare and turning away, he began to smile. It was the best sight I'd seen in days.

"Hey, you're awake," he said, reaching up to grasp my hand in his

hair with his while his grin widened. Then he leaned over to kiss my forehead, and his voice suddenly cracked with emotion. "Jesus, Natalie. You really freaked me out this time. I thought you wouldn't - "

"Wake...up?" I finished for him. "Why? What...happened?"

"Well, you had a heart attack, for one."

"Really?"

"Yeah. You were hit by sniper fire three nights ago. One round went through your shoulder, the other into your back and out your chest. That last one grazed your heart, and it stopped beating for a while." He swallowed hard. "You were dead for five whole minutes, Coop."

"Shit. And I'm...just now...getting up?"

He chuckled. "Were you expecting to be better and ready to go right away after that?"

"No. I just - wow. Three...days out. It's...been a while since I...got hit that bad."

"Yup. Since the war, huh?"

"Yeah." I felt him still holding my hand, so I dared to broach the dreaded subject. "So...I noticed you're...talking to me...again now."

He brought my hand to his lips and gently kissed it. "Of course I am, Cooper. I love you."

My eyes started to water, and I had to swallow the feeling down before I could speak. "I wasn't...so sure...a few days ago. I thought...you hated me. And that you might...leave."

"Never." He looked me in the eyes as his smile returned. "I've loved you since we were seventeen, Natalie. And every day in between. I still do. I wasn't too happy with you and what you chose to do about Matt, but I wasn't going to go anywhere. I guess I just...wanted to make sure you knew how bad you screwed up."

I snorted, even though the motion sent pain ripping through my chest. When I recovered enough, I replied, "I...think I got...the message, you know. Loud and...clear."

"Yeah. I figured you did by then. I'm sorry I put you through that, honey."

"I'm...sorry, too, Will. I should've...told you...right away. About...Matt."

"I know, but you can't change that now. Just don't do something like that again, okay? Whatever it is, tell me, like you always have, and we'll tackle it together."

"All...right." I paused for a moment, then asked, "Did you...get the note?"

He shook his head. "Couldn't read it. Your blood was - " He swallowed again. "Kinda everywhere."

"Well, I said I was...sorry, Will. And that...I love...you."

My husband smiled. "Yeah. I got that much out of it, at least. And it's all I needed to hear."

I took a look at the monitors and saw that I was doing pretty good for now, considering. After exchanging a quick glance with Willis, I carefully peeled off the mask on my face and he leaned in to kiss me. I kissed him back as well, very softly.

Of course the minute I went against implicit medical orders, Corpsman Michael Reynolds walked in and caught me red-handed.

"Major, get that back on. Now."

I tried my best to chuckle as I did as he said for once.  
"Christ...Doc. Keep your...pants on. I'm...okay."

"You are not okay, ma'am," Reynolds said, a touch of annoyance in his voice. "You've been out cold for three days and had a myocardial infarction. You're lucky I was able to bring you around, because technically you were already dead on that table."

"So I...heard."

He gave me an incredulous look. "That doesn't bother you?"

"Doc," Willis said in a sharp tone then. "Lay off a bit. She just woke up."

The medic let out a sigh. "Yes, sir. You're right. I shouldn't agitate the patient this soon...no matter how much she agitates me."

He said that last part while staring right at me. I wanted to use what little strength I possessed to argue back - probably something about out-ranking him - but then I watched as Reynolds's lips slowly curled upward in a smile.

"I guess you called it the other day, Major. I'm sorry you got shot, but I'm very glad you're still with us."

"Only...thanks to you, Reynolds," I said in reply. "And damn...do I hate being...right all the time."

"So how long till she's on her feet, Doc?" Willis asked then.

Reynolds folded his arms across his chest, his smile fading. "Well, you just said it yourself, sir. She's only just woken up. Something like this could take a month to recover from, at minimum." He turned his gaze to my husband. "Sounds like now might be the right time to bring her up to the Affair, Captain. She'll be safer and more comfortable there while she recuperates."

The thought of being separated from Willis for that long after he'd

just started talking to me again - and while I was wounded - was unbearable. I quickly shook my head.

"No...Doc. Please. I want to...stay."

Willis must've understood what I was thinking, because suddenly he was against the idea, too. "The major has the right to decide where she wants to be, Reynolds. I think we'll keep her dirtside for now."

The medic frowned. "And if something happens, sir?"

"We've got you," Willis answered.

\* \* \*

><p>A short while later, Matthew and Major Hayden came in, although Doc didn't allow them to stay for long. I was still weak since I'd just woken up, and the medic didn't want me taking in too much at once, or tiring myself out trying to talk to everyone.</p>

All my best friend was able to do was grin at me and say, "Good to see you finally up, Cooper. And welcome to the 'I-got-sniped-and-all-I-got-was-this-stupid-purple-ribbon' club."

I snorted again, not remembering all the pain it had brought me the last time. I winced. "Damn, buddy. Don't...make me laugh, or I might...keel over again and...Doc'll...have my ass."

"That was some rough shit, Natalie, seriously," Hayden said then. "Don't leave yourself an open target again next time you're out there."

"What...do you mean?"

I looked to my friend for the answer, but it was Willis who replied.

"Word's come down from Colonel Dwight, Coop," he told me. "We're going after the rebs in two weeks. This'll be our last push to get them to back off, and then we turn our sights on those Remnant bastards on that island."

"Why wait...so long?"

Oliver gently placed a hand on my good shoulder. "Because we're hunting down those Jackals that did this to you first. And I promise you, we'll get every last one."

### 36. Chapter 35: Kindred Spirits

\*\*\*\*\*Chapter Thirty-Five: Kindred Spirits\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*\*2037 Hours, January 16, 2558. UNSC Outpost Columbia, Planet Khan. "The Night Before Battle," Outer Colonies. Day Twenty-Seven of the New Age of Warfare\*\*\*\*\*

A couple of weeks later, I was finally feeling well enough to sneak out of the medical wing on my own. I knew Doc Reynolds certainly

wouldn't approve, and I was prepared for a thorough chewing out when and if he caught me walking around, but today was important for two reasons: one, tomorrow was the day we planned to assault the rebel headquarters, and two, it was Willis's thirty-first birthday. Neither were events I'd miss for anything in the world - and I definitely wasn't going to spend them lying bored in a hospital bed.

I was still buttoning up my battledress jacket over my T-shirt when I met my XO out in the hallway. Captain Harris immediately did a double-take.

"Major Cooper?"

I flashed him a small grin. "How're you doing, Shawn?"

The captain chuckled. "I should be asking you that, ma'am. I was under the impression you were still recovering from your wounds."

"I guess technically, I still am. But you know how Doc likes to try to keep you tied down for too long. If I'm sending in my battalion to fight, I won't be sitting out myself."

"That's a good sentiment to have, Major, but are you sure you're well enough?"

I shrugged. "Good as I'll ever be. Either way, I think I've enjoyed about as much R&R as I can stand."

The truth was that my left shoulder still hurt like crazy - and my chest was little better. I could feel my heart hurting with every beat, but as long as I was upright and able to fire a weapon, I wasn't going to watch tomorrow's op from the sidelines. It was time to get back into it.

"So how's the 8th?" I asked.

"Nothing to report so far, ma'am. There's been some activity lately with the Jackals, but we've sustained no casualties." He smirked at me. "Mostly, it's been the alien bastards getting their asses handed to 'em by Major Hayden's battalion in your honor."

I smirked back. "That's good to hear. We ready for tomorrow?"

"Yes, ma'am. We just had our last briefing this afternoon, and everyone knows their positions and what to do. I'll send a copy of the battle plan to your datapad now for you to review, Major."

"Insofar as a plan is useful after the first few rounds start flying," I muttered. "But thanks. I'll look it over tonight."

"No problem, Major."

I raised an eyebrow at him then. "I trust you're still using non-lethals on the rebs as ordered? And flash-bangs?"

"Yes, ma'am. I gave the battalion your express orders on that."

I nodded. "Excellent. And great work with the engineers while I've been gone, Shawn. You've been a huge help."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"I'll meet up with you again early in the morning, Harris," I said.  
"We can go over any last minutes details then." I let out a sigh.  
"I'm sorry it's come to this, but I hope this one last push will finally change the insurgents' minds."

\* \* \*

><p>As soon as I finished talking to my XO, I continued on my way to my quarters. I hoped Willis would already be there. Considering the hour, I wasn't expecting him to still be out and about around the outpost, but there was a possibility he might be on a supply run to the <em>Suave Affair</em>. I hadn't kept up on the duty rosters since getting shot.

I rubbed absently at my chest then. I'd never thought much of it in the past, but in the last couple of weeks, I'd learned that bullets could hurt almost as much as plasma. Taking two rounds in the back from a 99-S5 was no joke. I knew I was extremely lucky to be alive.

When I finally reached the door and stepped inside, I found my husband sitting at the desk with his datapad in his hand. He was smiling at something before he heard me walk in, and then he glanced up, his expression full of surprise.

"Natalie? What are you doing up so soon? Are you feeling okay?"

I smirked at him as I made my way closer. "I wasn't going to miss your birthday. And as far as how I'm feeling goes..." I winced a little as I flexed my broken shoulder. "I'm not a hundred percent yet, but not dead, either. I've been getting better lately, slowly."

Willis gave me a look. "That's not entirely reassuring, but I guess I'll take it. Come over here."

He swept me down on his lap when I was close enough and kissed me. I placed a hand on his cheek and kissed him in return. Then we both pulled back as we grinned at each other.

"Happy birthday, honey," I said to him.

"Thanks, Coop. You're the best present I could get."

I hugged him tighter, then asked with a smirk, "How's it feel to be an old man at thirty-one?"

He sighed. "Not that different from thirty." He smirked at me in return. "And you're going to learn soon enough yourself, Cooper, so don't get too comfortable. You've only got two more months to go, you know."

"Yeah, I know," I answered. I thrust a hand in his short hair.  
"So...I noticed the cot's gone..."

Willis chuckled. "Yeah. I don't think we'll be needing that again."

My grin widened as I leaned in to kiss him a second time, harder now, but he stopped me. I threw him a questioning look while I pulled back myself.

"Wait a minute," my husband said. "There's something I want to show you first. I think you're going to like it."

"What is it, Will?"

He turned a bit and flicked his datapad back on. "It's what I was watching when you came in. Check it out."

Willis restarted the video from the beginning. It was a little over four minutes long, but it was the best possible gift my husband's parents could've given to either of us.

There were three parts to the video, filmed at different times. One was on Christmas morning and showed each of our kids opening up their presents at a frenetic pace, then all three grinning wide into the camera to wish Willis and I a merry Christmas. Next was New Year's and showed Gabe, Olivia, and Liam struggling to stay awake past nine at night. Finally, the last clip was the three of them shouting, "We love you, Mommy and Daddy!" to us. Then it ended.

Though I was smiling wide by the end of it along with my husband, I had tears in my eyes, too. I missed our daughter and our sons so much it physically hurt - sometimes even more than getting shot through the chest. But it was nice to see them, even if only like this, after three months apart.

A moment later, I wiped my eyes with my sleeve and said, "I take it your parents just sent this to you today?"

"Yep. For my birthday. But it was meant for both of us, really. They knew you'd enjoy it, too."

"I did." I let out a sigh then. "I miss the kids, Will. So much."

"Me, too, Coop." He rubbed my right arm up and down. "We may not be home soon, but we'll see them again, Natalie. I promise you that."

"I know. It's just..." I swallowed. "I came close to not being able to do that, Will. Very close."

"But you made it through. You said yourself you're getting better. You're even moving around now - a lot sooner than Doc thought you'd be." He leaned down a bit to kiss my neck as his voice went low. "And I hope that in time, you'll be well enough for...other things, too."

Slowly, I smirked at him again. "Who says I'm not well enough now?"

"Your heart...are you sure you can - "

I placed both my hands on his cheeks and kissed him, deep and hard, as I'd been intending to before he'd shown me the video. "I've been

wanting to do this for a while," I said to him in almost a whisper.  
"Ever since our fight. I just...needed to wait for the rest of my body to catch up."

Willis got the message instantly, and he kissed me back with equal fervor, a small grin plastered to his face. I turned around on his lap to straddle him, then started unbuttoning his uniform jacket as we made out. It was off in seconds and I tossed it to the side, slipping my hands underneath his T-shirt while he started working on mine.

Neither of us had any clothes on from the waist up by the time we made it to the bed. Willis and I quickly shoved off our boots, and then he was over me, pressing his body flush against me while my hands drifted lower between us to undo his fly. I kissed his neck and his shoulders, while he tried to be as delicate as he could with mine, knowing how much my wounded one still hurt.

But in the moment, the pleasure was overcoming the pain, and it felt incredible.

"And you thought I was going to leave this," Willis said to me then, out of breath now and grinning wide. "Not even close, Cooper. You're stuck with me."

I leaned up to kiss him on the lips again. And I grinned, too. "I love you, Will."

"I love you, too, Natalie."

\* \* \*

><p>It happened two more times before we were too exhausted to go again. My left shoulder was hurting bad by then, and my heart was pounding hard inside my chest as I tried to catch my breath. But it'd been one of the most amazing nights of my life. I lay there in a kind of daze for a few moments afterward while I stared up at the ceiling of our room, seeing but not at the same time. Willis, sweaty and breathing hard himself beside me, finally voiced what I was thinking.</p>

"That was...shit." I could hear the grin on his face. "That was fantastic, Coop."

"Yeah. I didn't think..." I let out a happy breath. "I didn't think I was well enough for all that yet."

My husband chuckled. "Doc would probably kill you himself if he knew. Damn."

I laughed, too. "Yep. He probably would." I used my last bits of energy to turn my head to look at him. "But we keep this to ourselves. I've been yelled at enough over the years about...going overboard before I should."

"Of course, Natalie."

We were both quiet for a while before I spoke again, finally starting to recover now.

"So tomorrow's it, huh?"

"Yup," Willis replied, putting an arm under his head. "Last push against the rebels. We caught almost all the Jackal snipers that were after you. Now this is all that's left before we hit Qamar Island."

I frowned and closed my eyes as I turned over to snuggle into his side, getting close to dozing off now. "And who knows what we'll find there," I mumbled. "I just hope it's not as bad as it sounds."

### 37. Chapter 36: Assume the Worst

\*\*Chapter Thirty-Six: Assume the Worst\*\*

\*\*1642 Hours, January 17, 2558. Near the City of Redwood Falls, Planet Khan. "The Interrupted Retribution," Outer Colonies. Day Twenty-Eight of the New Age of Warfare\*\*

The forest was oddly quiet as I crept through ahead of my battalion, dressed in full combat gear with my DMR up and ready for anything that might jump out at us. It was another beautiful day on the Outer Colony world following an exceedingly pleasant night, and yet despite that, I still found myself feeling anxious and sweating a little underneath the bulk of my equipment. It wasn't from the exertion, though - a lot of it was from the pain of my wounds, and just straight-up nervous fear. I swallowed it down and focused on what lay ahead.

A whisper went through the COM then.

"Major Cooper?"

I quickly went into a crouch, signaling the Marines behind me to do the same, before I answered. "Go ahead, Shawn. Any activity yet?"

"No, ma'am. Not on this side at least. And I'm pretty sure if the 904th had engaged, we'd be hearing it from here."

"I agree," I replied. "Something must be up. Wait one, Captain."

"Will do, Major."

After switching to the battalion-wide channel, I said, "Marines, listen up. This is Major Cooper. The head element is just arriving at the complex, but no one's come out to greet us yet. Standby and watch for any suspicious activity - a movement, a sound, anything. And most of all, be vigilant for booby traps. The rebs are known to set those around their buildings. So stay alert."

Acknowledgment lights winked green across my HUD, but I still felt tense. I knew it was my combat instincts kicking in, honed over years spent on various battlefields fighting a number of different enemies. Atom, my old Elite ally, had ingrained in me even more to always trust it, and I'd carried that faith in it since. Unfortunately for me, it'd never let me down before.

It wasn't right that the insurgents hadn't noticed yet that we were on approach in broad daylight. Something was brewing.

After spending another moment in still silence, straining to hear anything out of place in the forest, I finally gave up and clicked the COM again, this time to my best friend. "Hayden? It's Cooper. Do you read?"

"Gotcha, Natalie," came the instant reply. "All quiet on our end, too. Be careful. This is when it gets bad."

I snorted lightly. "Tell me about it. My instincts are practically sending up red flares in warning."

The other major chuckled. "Good instincts. Just follow my lead, Cooper. We'll enter first and let you know if we need backup. Be ready."

"Always am, buddy."

As usual, the wait was torturous, but something I'd had to deal with countless times before now. I kept my guard up all the while, scanning everything I could see past the trees with my eyes as well as the sensors in my helmet, but it still came back negative. Not so much as an animal squeak sounded.

Then there was an explosion.

In the moment I ducked out of reflex, although in the next second, my mind told me it was a small one on the other side of the rebel HQ based on the sound. Still, my best friend was over there, and I feared for his safety and that of his Marines.

"Oliver?"

"I'm fine!" came the instant reply. "Someone just set off a trip wire here! Watch it! This could be - "

Major Hayden didn't get to finish what he was about to say. Even as he spoke, tens of insurgents suddenly came rushing out of every single entrance to the compound and ran straight for us, weapons to bear and trigger fingers ready.

"Oh, shit!" I yelled.

Propelling myself immediately to the ground, I landed with hard thump that forced the air out of my lungs and made me see stars for a good minute. My shot-up shoulder was throbbing harshly beneath my gear, while my heart hammered loud in my chest, still not fully healed yet from the sniper rounds that had passed through my body close by. Knowing how badly bullet wounds hurt now, though, I was in no way itching to be riddled with rounds again. I'd take the pain from a fall in full battle rattle over getting pierced with lead any day.

"Marines, open up!" I shouted then from my prone position.  
"Now!"

The sounds of chaos around me only grew louder as the dozens of Marines hiding between the trees behind me opened up now as well,

countered the sudden hail of bullets the rebels were firing at us. But unlike what was being thrown towards us, I had my men and women firing non-lethals only. In contrast, everything the insurgents squeezed off our way was as deadly as you could get. I knew we'd have to stay low and move our way up slowly in order to take them down.

So that's what I did myself. Gritting my teeth against the sharp pain, I used my right arm to crawl along the ground to get into better position - without getting myself shot through a second time. All the while, I held onto my gun with my left, but my injured side was still weaker than the other. Twice I dropped my DMR in the red dirt and had to pick it back up as I moved forward through the forest, cursing under my breath as I did so. Then, finally, I reached what I'd been aiming for - a huge, thick fallen tree trunk. I quickly propped my rifle up on the top, searched for a target, and let loose a rapid burst.

I hit the insurgent I'd been gunning for in the gut, and the man fell backward from the impact, wheezing and rolling on the ground from the pain. Part of me felt bad, but a side of me that remembered waking up in massive pain myself in the medical wing after being unconscious for three days didn't. I remembered the video clip Willis had shown me of our kids last night, too, and recalled the painful thought of what they would've done without me if I hadn't woken up at all - if Doc Reynolds hadn't been there once again to save my skin and bring me back from the brink. All of that invigorated me and I suddenly turned away from the man and locked onto another target, then squeezed the trigger again.

Unlike the rebels, I knew I wasn't killing anyone, and that made what I was doing now all the more easy to do. I was angry, though never enough to want them dead. I just needed them incapacitated so they weren't killing me - or my Marines.

"Major, heads up!"

The shout came just as I was turning my sights on a third reb. Glancing up out of instinct while I ducked back behind my cover, I saw the helmeted head of a figure run up onto the rooftop of the complex and start to set up a machine gun. Two more insurgents appeared beside him in the next split-second, and then the heavy weapon fired.

A storm of lead suddenly chewed up the entire front side of the giant tree trunk I was behind, sending splinters and wood fragments high into the air and shooting off at all sides. As I crouched beneath it, half hugging the ground around my DMR and half pressed against the massive log, I could feel the force of the rapid shots buzzing in my ears and reverberating across my armor plates through my whole body.

It was like having someone go crazy with a chainsaw right next to you. I could barely hear myself think, but I knew in the moment that even my thick cover wouldn't last long against another couple barrages like that. Soon, the gunner had to reload, and that's when I keyed my COM.

"Snipers, it's your turn! Take that MG out! The rest of you, stay the hell down until that thing's out of commission, then we move up! Wait

for my signal!"

There were no acknowledgment lights this time since everyone was too focused on the fight. But I knew they'd heard and gotten the orders. Just a few seconds later, I heard a sudden sharp crack go through the air, and I watched as one of the insurgents beside the gunner went down in an instant, a spray of blood emerging from the back of his head. Then there was another crack, and the other rebel went down in much the same fashion.

I'd made a command decision to supply my battalion's sharpshooters with real bullets. Some things I couldn't afford to spare, and those were enemies with heavy weapons that could deal a serious amount of damage to my men. And, much like my husband, I found that in regards to things like that, I didn't feel as regretful as I thought I would. Weapons like MGs - and the insurgents manning them - really just needed to be put out of commission. Permanently.

When I risked peeking up from behind my cover again, I saw the gunner on the rooftop getting antsy now as he jerked back to cock the weapon. To his credit, though, he didn't abandon his post, and instead dug in more fiercely as he pointed the barrel back at me. Under the circumstances, I couldn't say I was flattered by the attention, but then again, I had little reason to worry. An instant later, just as the reb was about to let off the first burp of the newly reloaded gun, he was shot through the chest and fell back against the cement, dead.

"Nice work, sharpshooters!" I yelled through the COM then. "Marines, let's go!"

I winced a little as I got up, the fear and stress of the moment making my chest ache, but even without turning around to look, I knew I had the might of hundreds of Marines at my back, ready to do what was needed. On the other side, Major Hayden had the same. And somewhere in the skies above was Willis, on-call for any additional backup my friend and I couldn't provide each other.

We already knew thanks to Matthew and Lieutenant Lloyd's efforts how many rebels we were facing here. The enemy had a lot of tricks up their sleeve, too, but we had the numbers. And it was time to end the poking and prodding and harassing and flat-out assault they'd been bothering us with since before we'd even landed on Khan. Whether they wanted the help or not, the UNSC was here to stay. And this was our last resort now to bring that point across.

As I sprinted for the closest entrance now, I thought of everything our outpost had gone through, both while we'd still been on Earth and since our arrival. We'd come to Khan to help, and none of what we'd been forced to endure here because of that had been justifiable. It still made my blood boil to think that after the Human-Covenant War, more fighting was the rebels' answer to everything rather than cooperative diplomacy.

My best friend had died in the war for humanity's sake - to keep the human race alive and prevent our extinction as a species. So had my father, my mother, my older sister, countless friends and colleagues, and even Willis and I ourselves had come close to the ultimate sacrifice many times. I couldn't think it was all for nothing, just to have our species survive to be at each other's throats again four

years later. It was time for things to change. Here. Now.

And yet, as I was running towards the complex to fire off non-lethals at my fellow human beings that I'd fought for years to protect, something happened that made all of us think twice about what we were doing.

A very familiar sounding \_shwoop\_ went through the forest then. I'd heard it enough times during the war to instantly know what it was - even before I saw the giant blue orb coming towards the building.

"Everybody down, \_now\_!"

The impact was worse than anything I'd seen since Voi. After the incoming plasma round drowned out my words, it hit the side of the rebel HQ with bone-rattling force, sending super-heated shards of glass, wood, and concrete flying everywhere. All of it happened before my body even touched the ground.

For what seemed like a long time, I was deprived of my senses as my ears rang, my vision blurred, and all I could smell was choked out by smoke. All I could feel was the shockwave. And the sudden pain in my chest was excruciating.

Somehow a coherent thought made its way through the muddled haze: I'd been way too close to the blast. It became apparent when I finally opened my eyes and had to blink several times to be able to get a clear picture out of them. I blinked again at the red dirt, coughed it out of my lungs while my helmet's systems tried to compensate, and then I saw the blood. But it wasn't mine.

At least six dead bodies lay strewn around me - four rebels and two Marines. Each had a gaping wound to the head or gut, or a blown-off limb beneath the big black crumbled section of building the Wraith tank blast had blown out. Even before the sight made my stomach churn, the smell hit me as the air was finally filtered, and I almost gagged. All the years I'd been in combat had never dampened that reaction to gore.

I felt someone grip my shoulder before I could really get sick. It was Staff Sergeant Porter.

"Major Cooper, ma'am? Are you all right?"

My tongue felt like lead in my mouth as I stared at the mangled bodies, but slowly, I nodded. "Yeah, Staff. Thanks. I just - "

I didn't know how to finish that, so I grunted against the pain as I pushed myself up and tried to focus. I needed to get into contact with Hayden, find out what the hell was going on. And why a former Covenant tank was suddenly being used against us. Had the rebels traded with the Jackals for that? Were the remaining Jackals using it? All of the speculation made my muddled brain hurt.

When I finally stood on unsteady legs, my aide gripped my good shoulder and gave me a light shake to bring me around again.

"Ma'am? Are you sure you're okay?"

I tried to answer but then clutched at the armor covering my chest. It hurt bad now, worse than my wounded shoulder. Between last night and the current battle, I knew that I probably wasn't doing myself any favors in the getting better department. But I found that I was sweating all of a sudden, and my breathing was coming in rapid gasps instead of being regular and even. Porter reacted right away and placed an arm around me.

"Hang on, Major. I'll get you to Doc."

"No," I protested with effort. "I...need to..."

"You need a break for now, ma'am. At the very least. Medic!"

Though I was feeling terrible, my mind rationalized that Reynolds was probably up to his neck in patients since the plasma round had landed amongst us. I didn't want to bother him with whatever was going on with me, but I found it hard to decline treatment when I couldn't breathe well. With effort, Staff Sergeant Porter finally pushed me through the middle of the pack away from the HQ - and the main fight - and sat me down carefully on the ground against a tree.

"Ma'am?"

Once seated in the dirt with my legs stretched out in front of me and my rifle across my lap, I felt like I could finally get some air again. I was sure these were side effects of my recent gunshot wounds and not anything new cropping up, but it was still a little unnerving to deal with while taking heavy fire from the rebs - and possibly someone else now, too. And without Doc Reynolds available yet to tell me exactly what it was, the situation was made even worse.

When I didn't answer, Porter figured I was really in trouble. I heard him key the COM to my XO. "Captain Harris, this is Staff Sergeant Porter. Be advised, the major's been incapacitated. Battalion is yours for now, sir." Then my long-time aide looked down at me again. "All due respect, Major, but did the medic clear you for combat duties this soon?"

I wanted to wave his new question away, but all I managed was some sort of vague gesture that didn't resemble anything in particular. So I was forced to speak. "No...Staff. He didn't. But I'm...okay."

Technically, I should've still been in my bed recovering in Columbia's medical wing, but I wasn't about to tell him that.

In the next moment, I watched Porter open his mouth to reply, saw the frown on his face, and could almost intuit what he was about to say. Yet I never actually heard the words, because another shwoop sound came through the trees instead.

"Incoming!" the staff sergeant shouted.

I nearly had the wind knocked out of me for the second time today when my aide barreled into me, trying to cover my body from the blast or any shrapnel that might emerge our way. It was a reflex, and one I understood very well, but the new plasma round didn't hit anywhere near us. Like the first one, it hit closer to the building - and

judging by the number of barked orders and pained screams coming through the COM soon after, it wreaked havoc among our lines as well as the rebs'.

Since no one was getting the information to me yet, I opened up a private channel myself to Major Hayden. That's when a general broadcast interrupted the signal. I didn't have to read the name and rank flashing across my HUD to know who it was.

"All UNSC ground units, this is Captain William Hawk overhead, callsign Talon," my husband said. "Those are in fact Wraith tanks on approach, Marines. And they're attacking both sides. It's the -"

"It's the Storm," I whispered under my breath at the same time.

### 38. Chapter 37: High Stakes Game

#### \*\*Chapter Thirty-Seven: High Stakes Game\*\*

Corpsman Michael Reynolds finally showed up when the assault against the newly arrived Storm troops was in full swing. Not too far ahead of my position - where my aide dutifully stood guard with his squad surrounding us in a small, loose perimeter - were the frontlines. I could hear a ton of explosions going off within scant seconds of each other, plasma and human ordnance alike. And for once, it wasn't just Marines fighting rebels. Now both sides were forced to do what I'd been pushing for all along: cooperate to survive and beat back the alien horde.

I still couldn't figure out where the Remnant warriors might've come from. Obviously the island just off the coast from here, but how and why they'd suddenly decided to attack the mainland remained unclear. I didn't know their numbers yet, either, but judging by the sounds of the pitched battle being fought all around us, it definitely wasn't the low estimates our spook had given us. And I trusted in Lieutenant Lloyd's skills. That meant they'd somehow acquired more troops right under our noses...but how?

I decided it was something I'd have to talk to others about before I could make anymore sense of it. For now, I was still neck-deep in my own problems. Like breathing, and my heart going haywire.

"Doc," I attempted to say in greeting the medic, though it came out in a more strangled tone than I would've liked. Reynolds' eyes went a little wide and he jogged up to me fast.

"Major? What happened? What are you doing out here fighting?"

"Couldn't...sit out..."

Reynolds snorted, fixing his blue gaze on me. "Yeah, good plan. Your body's not up to this kind of strenuous activity yet, ma'am. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, I...jumped the gun..."

"As usual, Major." He motioned for me to lay down. "Let me take a look."

As soon as I was on the ground, he waved to Porter's squad to move in closer to surround us with their firepower, then helped me pull off my helmet and started stripping off my torso armor.

"I don't know if you remember this, ma'am, but you just got shot through your chest two weeks ago," he said while he worked. "And you came this close to getting pronounced dead. You should still be in the medical wing. How'd you get out?"

A faint smirk on my face was all I could manage. "With my legs and feet."

That earned me a brief look, but then the medic quickly pulled out his datapad to check my vitals.

"Whoa," Reynolds said a moment later. "Tachycardia. All the intensity and adrenaline rush of the fight put your heart into overdrive." He glanced down at me again. "That's not good when you've just endured such serious trauma, Major. Your body - and your heart - are still weak from those bullet wounds. It hasn't been nearly long enough yet for them to fully heal."

"You make...due with what...you got, Doc."

"No," he said firmly. "You don't, ma'am. There's no reason for you to be out here right now. You need - "

I let out a frustrated sigh. "My Marines are...out here, Michael. That's...always...reason enough. Now can you...fix this...or not?" I paused to take in an uneven breath. "Dammit. I'm too...fucking young to have...heart problems."

The medic snorted a second time. "That'd be true if you hadn't been nicked by a sizable bullet, Major. Survive something like that, and you've got this to deal with for a while. You're lucky you're not six feet deep."

"You mean...six feet...under?"

"Whatever." It was his turn to sigh now. "There is something I can do about this, ma'am. A medicine I can inject you with. But as always, this is not an instant cure. And while the symptoms will dampen in the short term, in the long run, it's to your detriment, not benefit."

"Right. Just...do it."

He frowned. "I was afraid you'd say that, so there's something else to deter you. It's going to counteract the pills you've been taking for birth control. Not that...you should be engaging in those activities yet, either."

"Like...completely?"

"Not completely, but it definitely increases the odds that you'll get pregnant. Some of the meds I had to give you for your wounds have already been doing that, to an extent. But this'll have a more

drastic effect."

The words were out before I could stop them. "Shit. I wish you'd...told me that sooner."

I watched the medic's eyes light up in momentary surprise, but it was gone again in a flash, replaced by his professional mask. "I didn't think that was pertinent information to dole out while you were still recovering in the medical wing. My apologies, ma'am. Just...be careful, from now on."

There wasn't much I could do about that now except hope that whatever Doc had given me earlier hadn't made too big a mess of things. Another item to add to the list of stuff going awry today.

"Okay," I said. "I get it. And all the...nasty side effects...too. Just...give me it, Doc."

"Yes, ma'am."

It was the first sensible thing Reynolds had said all day. He stuck me with the drug, and just a few seconds later, I felt my heart rate begin to normalize, and my breathing grew steadier. I finally stopped perspiring, too, and felt more able to get back into the fight. A minute after that, I managed to push myself back up to a sitting position, then started strapping my armor back on.

"I don't suppose you've...heard anything about why the Storm are here, huh?" I asked the medic.

He shook his head. "That's a negative, Major. Been too busy working on patients to listen to the COM chatter lately."

"I figured."

I slapped my helmet back on as well, and then had Staff Sergeant Porter help me up to my feet. When I was standing again, I turned back to Reynolds.

"Thanks again, Doc." I smirked beneath my helmet. "It's a good thing we picked you back up on Earth before we...left to come here. I would've been in a casket twice now."

"No problem, ma'am. Just try to take it easy from here. You've still got a long road to recovery ahead of you."

"Duly noted."

As I grabbed my DMR from the ground, though, I could still hear the battle continuing to rage around us as if nothing had happened. There was still a lot to do. So I pointed to Porter beside us and said, "All right. Let's head back out, Staff Sergeant."

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><p>My first order of business when I returned to the field was making sure I re-equipped my battalion with regular bullets - ex-Covie armor was tough to break through, and that was true even more so with non-lethals. It put my Marines at a serious disadvantage with the new enemy we faced, so I tackled that issue before the rest.

I keyed my COM as I took cover again from the incoming Wraith rounds.<p>

"Hayden?"

"Yeah, Cooper. Go ahead."

"Don't suppose you've got any extra ammo to lend us? It's a long way back to Columbia from here."

My best friend chuckled, even amid the chaos. "Sure do. Tired of playing the pacifist?"

"Nope. Not yet," I answered sincerely. "We've just got new targets to fry."

I heard him sigh over the radio. "Fair enough. But watch your back, Natalie. Please. As soon as this fight's over, you can bet your ass the rebs'll be waiting there to finish the job the Jackals started with you."

I didn't want to start an argument with him now, so all I said in reply was, "We'll see, buddy. And thanks."

With that task complete, I switched to the battalion-wide channel now. "Marines, this is Major Cooper. The 904th has graciously decided to give us some better firepower. You're free to engage with live rounds." Then in a private one to my XO, I said, "Harris, it's Cooper. I'm back, more or less."

"Glad to hear it, ma'am. The 8th Engineers are all yours."

The nice reunion with everyone via COM stopped then as a sudden round hurtled into the immediate vicinity. My eyes went wide the moment I saw the giant blue orb arching through the air, so I gripped my rifle tight and sprinted as far from my current position as I could. I landed in a heap just outside the rebel HQ building, near where I'd been at the start of the fight, heart pounding and both chest and shoulder hurting. But when the huge round impacted the earth, I was no longer in danger of getting blown away with it.

I glanced up just a second after the shockwave passed. It was only then that I realized who I'd inadvertently gone running toward - the human enemy. Four shaken up insurgents stared back at me, rifles raised, unsure now what to do about me as the newly appeared alien threat advanced. I didn't give them time to think it over. I just reacted.

"Don't just fucking stand there and stare!" I yelled, as if they were my own Marines. "Move it! They've got this entire position zeroed in! You can bet the rest of the damn building is next!"

They looked back at me uncertainly for a while, but eventually figured their skin was first. When I realized they were waiting on me for direction now, I gestured to more solid cover nearby.

"Hurry, get over there! Hunker down and set up with whatever you've got! We'll take care of the Wraiths, but it's up to you to deal with the ground troops! And they're coming in fast!"

I spared a moment to look up ahead and saw exactly what I'd been expecting: hundreds of Storm troops on approach. It was time to get things going myself, or we were all toast. DMR held tightly in both hands, I keyed the COM to my husband this time.

"Will? Uh - Talon? You on station?"

There was a bit of static, and then his voice came through. "Yes, ma'am. What do you need, Major?"

"Those Wraith tanks...how the hell are they maneuvering through the forest like that?"

"They're not, Coop," Willis replied. "The boys and I just did a flyby. Wherever they came from, the Storm found a clearing nearby to set up shop, about four hundred-fifty meters out. They've got four tanks there just lobbing rounds at the HQ."

I paused, confused. "Are they trying to kill us, or the rebs?"

"Both. They're not discriminating from what I can tell."

"Then why target the building?"

"Because it's the closest human structure they can destroy, and you're all surrounding it."

I frowned. "Oh. Right."

"I assume you have orders, ma'am?" my husband asked.

Recovering quickly from my lapse, I said, "Yeah, Talon. I want those things out of commission. We don't have anything down here right now to take on that armor, and we're looking at an enormous ground battle shortly. Something's gotta give or we're cooked."

"Roger that. Sit tight, Major. We're on our way."

Willis's responses to my questions assured me that he was as much in the dark as to how the Storm had suddenly appeared here as I was. Hayden hadn't mentioned anything to me yet, either. I still wondered how that had happened, and what was truly going on, but that wasn't anything I could get an answer to at the moment. For now, I just needed to make sure we all survived the fight, then wonder about the how and why questions later.

Opening a channel to my battalion, I said, "Marines, we've got heavy ordnance incoming! Friendly this time! Everyone stay as far back as you can, and get ready! Captains, get your companies into position and make sure you dig in for a tough fight! The Storm's going to hit us hard as soon as their tanks are out!"

Even before I heard the hypersonic sounds of Willis's squadron of Broadswords coming through up above, though, I heard yet another shwoop. This time when I ducked, I was far enough away to watch where the glowing plasma round landed - and it was devastating. The round burst among the trees before hitting the ground and detonated, felling three large redwoods and sending wood fragments everywhere. Those nearby the blast were ignited, and suddenly, part of the forest

around the rebel HQ was now ablaze.

It was Hayden who opened up a private channel to me now.

"Holy shit! Cooper, did you see that?"

I coughed on a thick plume of smoke that was very rapidly enveloping the area around the building now, faster than my helmet's air filters could compensate. "Yeah, I did. Holy - !"

Another mammoth round launched into the air, but unlike before, the sound was quickly followed by something else - a flurry of missile rounds from our pilots in the skies. One Wraith went up in a cloud of black smoke just as its ordnance burst through the roof of the HQ building, smashing a huge hole in the middle of it at the top. If we'd still been after the rebels, it would've been a good way to finally get at them from above, but instead, we were all fighting for our lives against the Remnant now.

At that point I ducked again, just as two more Broadswords passed overhead. One came strafing through at top speed, chewing up more of the trees surrounding the clearing, and making a few dents in one of the alien tanks from what I could hear. The other launched another set of missiles, and a second tower of black smoke spiraled into the air.

"Cooper!" Willis shouted over the COM then.

"What?" I cried back.

Then he laughed at my reaction. "Hold on, Major. Got one more pass coming through. Two tanks down, two to go. And watch those fires. They're spreading."

Willis was right. When I looked up at the forest, another half a dozen trees were alight now. I used the time in between air support runs to switch my cover for another, further away and to the right of the now badly damaged HQ building. Then I keyed my COM again.

"Not funny, Will," I said under my breath.

"You'll feel better after this next run, I promise," my husband returned. "Starting now, so keep your heads down."

In the meantime, the other two Wraiths were still active, but it wasn't for long. The next trio of pilots came hurtling through overhead, loosing cannon rounds and missiles alike, until a second set of twin columns of smoke could be seen through the forest. With a hair-raising sound of screeching metal and the smell of oily flames, the Storm's hardest-hitting pieces of equipment were now all out of commission.

When it was over, I propped my back up against my cover and let out a deep sigh of relief. I found myself grinning as soon as I heard my husband's squadron finish their run.

"Oh, Jesus. Thanks, Talon."

Willis chuckled. "No problem, ma'am. Now give 'em hell."

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><p>The rest of the fight was like everything else I'd encountered during the war - and everything I had way more experience doing than I should. Instead of fighting people, it was back to aliens...at least for now. And that was an area I excelled in.</p>

Though there were a great number of Storm troops to fight, we also had a lot of Marines on hand for defense, and a good number of rebels, too. In this battle, we were better off together than alone. Once everyone realized that - and with the nasty Wraith tanks now out of the fight - pushing back the Remnant wasn't as daunting of a task as it had first seemed.

Both insurgents and Marines let loose with long sprays of gunfire all around me, our units set up in an arch around the bombed-out HQ building. Parts of the forest were still on fire, and that was a threat to anyone who got too close, but again, with the help of our air support, even that was reduced to something manageable. As soon as the strafing runs were complete, Willis had ordered his squadron to start dumping its gallons of water tanks onto the flames so that those of us on the ground weren't forced out of our cover by the fire. With that, our strategic positioning improved, although the affected parts of the woods remained blackened and charred by the hits.

But our lives counted more than the forest. And right now, we were dishing out the hurt to the members of the Remnant who'd suddenly attacked all of us today.

Gripping my DMR hard, I tracked a Grunt running between the trees, trying to get at a small group of rebels that had been cut off from their larger unit. From behind the cover of one of the many felled tree trunks littering the ground, blackened from the blasts, I squeezed the trigger and took the alien down in one burst. Quickly shifting to another target, I did the same with a second Grunt nearby, then set my sights on the bigger prize - an Elite. For that one, and its Jackal friends on approach, I pulled a frag off my web belt and primed it, then sent it flying towards them.

"Fire in the hole!"

The explosive burst in the dirt a split second after I shouted the warning, and did about as much damage as I'd expected. While the Elite managed to roll away in time, the two Jackals behind it didn't, and both went up in a geyser of bright purple blood and high-pitched squawks. I smirked inside my helmet.

"Payback time, you son of a bitch," I muttered.

I didn't waste too much time taking revenge, though. There was still another formidable target at large.

I brought my gun up again in an instant and fired off a trio of bursts at the stunned Elite. All three did little except get absorbed by its translucent shield, but the fourth burst finally caused it to fizzle out, and the fifth put several fatal rounds into its helmeted head. The tall creature fell back against a burnt tree trunk then and slumped to the ground, dead.

As soon as the Elite was down, I got up from behind my cover and raised my right arm, signaling the Marines behind me to move up. "Let's go, Marines!"

Watching while we did so, I noticed that the small group of rebels I'd saved decided to tag along, too. That was fine by me, as long as they didn't stir trouble. We could use all the manpower we could get for now.

The more the merrier. And deadlier.

It was when we moved up past the previous front lines, ahead of the main entrance to the burned-out HQ, that I suddenly realized something was wrong. There weren't as many Storm troops in the area as there'd once been, and the steady sounds of gunfire and constant rattle of MGs around us - and even the occasional cracks of sniper rifles - could no longer be heard with as much frequency. I paused for a moment to look around, but, seeing nothing unusual, got down on one knee to hit the radio to my XO.

"Harris? This is Major Cooper. What's going on? I don't see a wall of aliens up ahead, and I know we didn't clear them out that fast."

The response didn't come for quite a while, but I waited.

Finally, the captain said, "I don't know, ma'am. We're seeing the same thing all around. Looks like the Storm just decided to clear out."

I frowned. "Why would they do that? They just got the jump on us."

"I can't answer that, Major. Maybe try Hayden?"

Letting out a quick sigh, I took the suggestion and hailed my best friend next.

"Oliver? Are you seeing this?"

"Yeah, Cooper." He swallowed. "There's a reason why they're retreating."

"Why? What happened?"

"I'll have the spook fill you in."

I wasn't even aware that Lieutenant Lloyd was somewhere on the battlefield. It shouldn't have surprised me, given that he was an ONI operative, but it did.

"Major Cooper?"

"Go ahead, Lieutenant," I answered, keeping my gun up and sights moving in case anything else was going to come at us.

"I've got some...shit. Well, some bad news for you, ma'am. For all of us." He took in a deep breath. "I lost contact with Outpost Columbia during the battle, Major. I just hoofed it there and back to check it out."

I felt my blood run cold. I'd been here too many times before in the past, and I could feel the hit coming. "And?"

"Columbia's been destroyed, ma'am. The Storm somehow knew...waited until the bulk of us were out here fighting the rebs, and they attacked the outpost en masse. Colonel Dwight is dead."

"Oh, my God. Fuck."

It was all I could think of to say in the moment. That was just about the worst possible news we could've received right now. But even that wasn't my primary concern. It was my young brother-in-law, who'd been left behind at the outpost during the battle. What about Matthew? I wondered. I swallowed down the hurt I knew this was going to cause Willis, and prayed that his little brother was okay. And that we'd somehow find him alive...a second time.

But before I could delve into that too deeply, Lieutenant Lloyd was speaking again.

"I suppose you know what this means now, ma'am," he said.

Lost in my thoughts, I replied, "What?"

"You and Major Hayden are now jointly in charge of everyone left."

### 39. Chapter 38: A Range of Possibilities

#### \*\*Chapter Thirty-Eight: A Range of Possibilities\*\*

The news of Outpost Columbia's demise - and Colonel Dwight's death - was as tough to take as it was surprising to hear. As soon as the fight with the Storm was over with, at least for the moment, it was time for some decisions to be made. We needed to figure out where to go from here, in terms of what to do about the newly arrived alien force, how and why they were on the mainland now, and how we should begin to approach the now-muddled circumstances concerning the rebels. None of the foot soldiers, at least, had tried to kill me, which I considered a plus - although I knew my best friend definitely wouldn't see things my way. And now, two people coming at the issue from very different angles were somehow tasked with providing everyone else with a solid set of rules of engagement.

Not to mention the fact that I felt I was in a little over my head with the sudden enormous responsibility of keeping every UNSC servicemember on Khan alive - not just my own battalion anymore. This was going to get tricky from here on out.

For now, a briefing was in order. It was hard to get everyone together in a safe spot considering the Storm and rebels were still out here somewhere, and we now had no fortified position to call our own, no temporary home to go back to. I suppose that could be our first order of business, but I suspected that for now we'd be better off being mobile anyway. We needed to drive out the Covenant Remnant, first and foremost, then figure out what we were going to do about the alien force on the island.

After taking the necessary precautions, it was decided the briefing

would take place under the guard of a platoon of armed Marines, who formed a tight but inconspicuous perimeter around the area. It was also held in a space large enough for one Broadsword to land - to provide further cover, and to ensure that the senior pilot on Khan was included in the talks. Since Major Collins was still aboard the Suave Affair with the remainder of the air wing we'd brought with us from Earth, that was Willis.

Major Hayden, Lieutenant Lloyd, and I waited a few minutes for his arrival hidden among the trees at different points. Only once he'd landed and emerged from the cockpit, flashing us a thumbs up, did we begin to move towards the craft. I got there first and gave my husband a brief hug, thankful that he'd made it through the battle unscathed, but didn't go any further in the presence of others. Willis hugged me back, and then we rejoined the rest.

Hayden started things off, pulling off his helmet for a moment and running a hand through his short brown hair before releasing a sigh. "Well, shit. We really didn't need this on our plate, too, but I guess we have no choice."

Standing beside me with his arms folded across his chest, Willis frowned. "What do you mean, sir?"

"You haven't heard?" I asked. When my husband shook his head in reply, my heart sank. I hated having to be the one to deliver the news. "We're not meeting here only about the Storm, Will. Columbia got overrun by the rest of the Remnant while we were fighting here. Colonel Dwight was killed in the attack, too." I glanced down at my boots. "Hayden and I are now the ranking officers planetside."

Willis didn't say a word for a good minute. Finally, though, he said, "Damn. Just...fuck." Then his eyes went wide. "Wait. What about my brother?"

I shook my head, and my heart broke for him a second time. "I don't know, honey."

"No. I can't lose him again. Natalie, we have to - "

"That's Major, Captain," Hayden corrected then, taking command of the conversation again. "And we'll deal with personal business later." He gave my husband an apologetic look to soften his words. "I'm sorry, Hawk, but that's the way it's got to be. Cooper and I have many more lives on our shoulders now. We have to ensure the safety of all of you here on Khan. To that end, I'd like to hear from the spook just what the hell is going on, and why the Storm were suddenly able to blindside us like this."

"I'd like to know that as well," I put in.

For once, Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd seemed just as lost as the rest of us. "I wish I could answer that question for you, sir, ma'am. I'd like to know myself. When I did my recon a few weeks back, there weren't nearly as many troops out there, and they were all confined to that island, checking out those ruins. I didn't get the impression at all that they had any ambitions - or the capability - to go for a strike on the mainland. Or that they even really cared much to do so in the first place."

"So what might've motivated them now?" I questioned, copying Willis's stance.

"In the absence of concrete intel, I can make some educated guesses, Major."

"Go ahead, Lieutenant."

The spook sighed. "They may have noticed the tension between the two factions of humans here on the mainland and decided that now would be a good time to attack. They might've noticed our forces seemed to be growing, what with the appearance of pilots and new troops and supplies, and figured their little operation on the island was now in jeopardy. I'm sure they want to protect that site with everything they've got, considering all the trouble they went through during the war - and even now - to keep it for themselves." He frowned. "But there's one thing even I don't understand, ma'am."

"And that is?"

"How their force just grew by leaps and bounds like that, and we never noticed. I'm not a bad spook. If they'd brought reinforcements in in any of the traditional ways, I would've known about it right away and would've relayed the info to you."

I thought about that for a moment, then glanced at my husband. "Will? When you were aboard the Affair recently, did you ever hear anything about a Storm ship in the area? One that'd arrived, or maybe even just seemingly passed through?"

Willis had regained his composure now, though I could still tell he was shaken up about Matthew. I could see it in his eyes. He answered me firmly though. "No, ma'am. In fact, I heard just the opposite. A lot of the crew were commenting on how quiet it'd been upstairs since we'd got here."

"So how in hell did they get more boots on the ground?" Hayden asked then. "And fucking tanks?"

"No idea, sir," Lloyd answered. "But I'll get to the bottom of it."

My best friend looked to me then for my input. "Natalie?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Send the spook back out. We need to know what the hell those alien bastards are up to now - and what their secret is. That many troops don't just spontaneously appear out of thin air."

"All right. Lieutenant Lloyd, you've got your orders."

"Yes, sir."

"You can take what you need, but we have to get you back on Qamar Island ASAP. Willis?"

"Sir?"

"I'm sure you'll provide him with a good pilot, someone who's good at

keeping their presence under the radar?"

Willis nodded. "Yes, sir. My wingmate, Captain Brandon Heat, can take him. He's experienced and knows his stuff. He'll get you in and out with no trouble."

"Good," Hayden said. "Now, we've got a couple more issues to tackle. We're scattered, and we've got no base. And Redwood Falls is crawling with Storm troops and rebels now."

"I think that's a simple one, Oliver," I replied. "We combine our forces with the insurgents and drive out the Remnant, then get after them on the island once we find out solid intel on their numbers and motivation."

Major Hayden snorted at that, just as I knew he would. "No. Absolutely not. That won't fly, Cooper. The rebs were just trying to kill us up till now, or did you forget? And it was only two weeks ago that you were clinically dead on Doc Reynolds's table. That was their doing."

"That was \_one\_ man's doing, and he used Jackal pirates to get it done, not his own men."

My friend looked at me like I was crazy. "You're willing to trust them after \_that\_? Natalie - "

"We just fought beside them right now, with no repercussions. In fact, they \_helped\_."

"Because it suited them!" Hayden retorted. "Don't mistake that for human camaraderie!"

"Well, this is a marriage of convenience for us now, too, isn't it? We have solid numbers, but still not enough if we're going to survive out here and beat the Storm back, then try to tackle whoever the fuck is left on the island, too." I let out a frustrated sigh and pushed a hand through my hair, trying to keep my temper in check. "I don't know if \_you\_ noticed, Hayden, but they have enough troops to keep two battalions - and a good-size unit of rebs - busy while they completely eradicated our outpost. What does that tell you about enemy strength? We \_need\_ help on this one."

"No. We bring in more air support. And armor and vehicles from the \_Affair\_."

I snorted. "Yeah, that'll help in the thick forest."

"It'll be \_very\_ useful on the island."

"But not until then," I shot back.

Finally, my best friend sighed, too. "All right. We'll discuss this later then, one on one. I'm not convinced quite yet, and I think you're putting way too much trust in a group of treasonous bastards that'll shoot you in the back as soon as give you aid. Which is funny, because that actually happened to you."

I shrugged. "We've all got our opinions. I know we won't share this one, but in the end we have to do what's best for our

Marines."

"Which brings me to another point," the other major said then. "Thoughts on how to resolve our territorial problem. We have no base, and I consider the entire city to be hostile to us, be it rebs or Storm. I'm inclined to think we need to start setting something new up, some sort of semi-permanent structure for housing and protection. I'm sure there's enough supplies on the Affair for that."

"It's a waste of time, seeing as we'll be out here fighting constantly now anyway. It'll just give the Storm another central point to get after and destroy. And it wouldn't be an issue if we just allied with the rebs," I said.

Hayden narrowed his eyes at me. "So what do you suggest, Major?"

"We do what we did for years during the war without complaint," I responded. "Sleep outside under the stars with assigned roving patrols and perimeter watches. We've all gotten too complacent and cushy post-war. Time to endure the shit like we used to. And we need to develop a plan that'll allow us to go on the offensive this time before the Remnant hits us again. It's the best way to ensure we get the upper hand."

For once, my friend didn't seem to have an argument for that. "Okay. What about right now?"

"We've been fighting for hours. Make sure everyone gets a moment to eat, resupply, and rest. Talk to my XO, Captain Harris, about organizing first watch and patrols. Maybe dig in light for now in case any of our enemies try to stir some shit while we're down. This is what we've got for now, so we make the best of it."

"What about you?"

"I'm gearing up and going to help my husband look for his brother," I replied as I pulled my DMR back into my hands. "It shouldn't take us long. We'll either find what we're looking for, or...we'll be back. And I know you can handle things in my absence for a bit."

"You should take a squad of Marines with you. Whatever's left of the outpost might still be crawling with the Storm."

I shook my head. "We'll move faster and have less of a chance of getting seen if it's just the two of us. I can let you know more of what we find when we get back."

Major Hayden mulled this over. "I'm hesitant to agree to that, but I can't stop you. Just don't get hurt, Cooper. We need you too now, more than ever."

"Don't I know it," I mumured.

I didn't want to mention to my friend that my days in the field might be numbered anyway - it'd be some time before I even knew myself if the meds Reynolds had given me for my wounds had counteracted the other pills I was taking.

And I didn't say anything to Willis about it yet, either. We all had enough things on our plate for now, and I knew he was worried about

Matthew, first and foremost. I just nodded at him once the briefing was over, and then we set off into the blast-charred woods together.

#### 40. Chapter 39: Hole in One

##### \*\*Chapter Thirty-Nine: Hole in One\*\*

Willis was rather quiet as we made our way through the battle-torn forest, heading back to the now-nonexistent Outpost Columbia. I realized he had a lot on his mind, and I was just as worried as he was about Matt, but knew the long trip would be even more grueling if neither of us said a word to each other. It wasn't like him, and I wanted to reassure him about what we'd discover once we got there.

Taking careful steps over a series of large fragments of felled trees, combat boots and uniform already dirty with black ash, red dirt, and alien blood, I decided to break the growing silence myself as I scanned the terrain ahead for movement.

"Will?"

"Yeah?"

"It's going to be okay. We'll find him."

Something happened to his voice then, and he responded with another low but unsteady, "Yeah."

I let out a discreet sigh as we continued forward. I hated seeing him like this. Willis had always been the one to reassure me about things, to tell me things were going to be all right in the end. But when it came to his brother, he'd already endured so much that I supposed hoping for a good outcome this time was just more than he could believe. It'd already been a miracle that we'd found him alive out here on Khan the first time. To do it again was going to take more than just luck.

But at least for my part, I believed the kid had survived. For all his youth, he'd already gone through a lot for a nineteen-year-old. I knew he could hold his own in a pinch.

Finally, after taking a cautious look around for any enemy activity - including any insurgents - I came to a halt in front of my husband and placed a hand against his armored chest. "Willis."

"What?"

He was forced to look at me now. I pulled up my visor to let him see my expression.

"Trust me. I know he's fine. He's a more capable kid than you think he is. I bet he's just keeping a low profile somewhere around the outpost, waiting for us to come back."

"That's not the only thing that's bugging me, Coop."

"Then what - ?"

He took in a deep breath. "I almost lost you again, too." I saw a faint smile appear on his face for the first time, but it was a sad one. "If it'd been up to Doc - if you weren't so damn stubborn and bent on doing things your way all the time - you'd be dead now. Do you realize that?"

I furrowed my brow at him. "How do you figure?"

"You wouldn't've been with the rest of the Marines out in the field today. You would've still been in your bed in the medical wing recuperating, where by all rights you should've been. And the Storm would've killed you."

It took me a moment to absorb that. I hadn't thought of it before now - too many other humungous things going on that I had to take care of, that I was responsible for. It was only now that my husband brought it up to me that I realized I'd just cheated death for the second time in as many weeks. Rather than making me feel lucky, I had to admit that it rattled me a bit.

"Shit," I finally said. "You're right."

Willis shifted his stance in front of me. "Look. I know this isn't anything you can do much about. This kinda stuff just seems to follow us around, and you especially. Part of it is because of the profession we chose, and part of it is just the type of person you are. You want to be everything to everyone at all times, and if it comes at your own personal cost, so be it. It's the same way you approached the whole situation with my brother. But please, Natalie." He looked me in the eyes now. "Think of what you do to everyone around you who cares about you and loves you every time shit like this happens. I don't want to keep seeing my wife on the brink of death. I don't want my kids to have to grow up without their mother one day because you chose to do something noble for everyone else and not for yourself. So can you promise me you'll be a little more selfish from time to time? For all of us?"

"Willis..."

"I'm worried that now that you're in charge of everyone, you might put yourself in a position that you can't get out of without getting hurt, or killed, because it'll be in the majority's best interest." It was his turn now to sigh. "I'm not asking you to turn your back on your duties, Cooper. I would never ask that of you. What I'm saying is, I hope you find a way to strike a balance so that Gabe, and Liam, and Olivia and I don't have to live with the consequences. You have a duty to your family, too, and I want you to be around for that."

I frowned, thinking of all the times I'd come close to biting the big one since earning my commission. I knew that between Heath, and Sigma Octanus IV, and even during the battle for Earth, I'd already put Willis through a lot over the years. That wasn't to say he hadn't done the same to me a few times, but it was definitely a skewed match-up. Now that I was older and more experienced, I tried to keep myself out of the worst kinds of trouble in combat, but like he'd said, that wasn't always possible to foresee. I'd always done all I could to strike the balance he was talking about, yet I knew that this time, for a number of reasons, the stakes were even higher. I'd have to do better, be more vigilant, about that now than

before.

"I'm sorry, Will," I replied. "You know I can't promise you I'll make it out unscathed." I snorted lightly. "I've already failed at that by getting sniped. But I want to be there for you and the kids, too. The four of you mean everything to me. I'll try my best."

After thinking it over for a moment, Willis finally seemed to accept that. "Okay. And I'll do the same. I just...have less occasion to be the one to have to take the brunt of things."

For some reason, that made me laugh - a genuine, hearty chuckle of amusement. "I hope you're grateful for that."

\* \* \*

><p>The woods were awfully quiet as we continued to make our way to whatever was left of the outpost. Following the big battle, neither the rebels nor the Storm were anywhere to be seen, although we knew they were both still here somewhere within the dense trees. It made the trek all the more unnerving, and I spent most of the time wondering when - and where - the next threat to us would emerge.</p>

We hadn't seen any signs of Willis's baby brother either, but that wasn't as surprising. I was willing to bet we'd find him closer to Columbia, not this far out.

I could tell the sudden silence was starting to get to Willis this time, too. He shifted from left to right with his SMG on my flank, watching the subtle movements of the forests for any telltale signs of an enemy approach.

"I keep feeling like we should've hit something by now," he finally said in a low voice.

"Me, too," I whispered back, keeping my own rifle to bear and scanning as well. "Just stay sharp. We're halfway there now, and it's possible the ex-Covies fanned out from the outpost after they took over."

No sooner had I said the words than the first shots were fired in our direction. It was plasma. My husband and I hit the ground in an instant as superheated rounds pierced the air just above our heads. If we'd remained standing even a fraction of a second longer, both of us would've been toast.

Though my left shoulder was now throbbing from the motion, I brought my gun up from my prone position and zoomed in fast, trying to track the target through the trees. It was easier said than done in the thick forest, but I figured if the Jackals had somehow managed it, so could I. Beside me, Willis was searching for the gunner with his weapon, too, but had no enhanced sights to help him out. I'd have to take the lead on this one.

Finally, after half a minute of looking, I found it - a lone Grunt running between the tall redwoods, sniffing the air. It seemed he might've seen us walking earlier and fired off some shots, but now that we'd hit the dirt, he'd lost sight of us. The alien looked a lot like an animal searching for its prey. And unfortunately, that was

us.

Before I rattled off a short yet loud burst with my DMR that would be heard across the woods, I shifted towards my husband and nudged his shoulder. He turned to face me, gun still pointed straight out.

"What is it, Coop? What did you see?"

"One Grunt, maybe fifty yards ahead. Seems like it can't see us anymore down here. Might be the scout for a patrol." At least, I prayed that's what he was. Because if the Grunt were the scout for the entire party that had destroyed Columbia, we were cooked. "Do you have silencer for your gun?"

Much to my relief, Willis nodded. "Yeah. In my pocket. Left side. Give me your rifle and I'll keep an eye on the Grunt."

I handed my DMR off to him while he traded me weapons. As soon as Willis got into position, looking down the scope of the rifle, I opened up the large cargo pocket along the leg of his flight suit and pulled out the silencer. I screwed it tight onto the barrel of the SMG, and then we exchanged guns again.

Willis had a small smirk on his face now. "I'm going to move up, Cooper. Got a nice bead on him now after looking through the scope. Poor guy isn't going to know what hit him."

"Okay, go. I've got your six."

Keeping my own sights focused on the top of the Grunt's head to cover my husband, just in case his burst missed, I waited prone in the messy forest undergrowth while Willis crept quickly but quietly ahead. The moment he was in range, I saw him stop and bring his submachine gun to bear again. Then he squeezed the trigger.

\_Pfffffffffft.\_

The trick worked. Willis brought the Grunt down in single tight burst, ending the small alien's life fast with its light blue blood decorating the foliage and tree trunks around it as the bullets tore through its middle, yet not alerting any of its possible allies nearby. It was the best we could've hoped for, and it was nice to have something work out for once. But that didn't mean we were out of danger yet.

As soon as the alien was down, I pushed myself up just a little from the red dirt and half-crouched, half-ran over to Willis.

"See anything else?" I asked.

"Nope. Just the one so far."

"All right. Let's get moving then, but keep your eyes peeled. Where there's one, there's others. If it's a patrol we might just be able to maneuver around them and continue on our way. If it's the whole element..."

Willis gave me a look. "Then we're screwed. Come on."

\* \* \*

><p>It was twenty more minutes before we made it to the edge of what used to be Outpost Columbia's outer perimeter. What we saw now could vaguely be recognized as such, and it made my heart sink to see what had happened to our former temporary home. My heart ached for Willis, too, because anything surviving this would be nothing short of a miracle - and if Matthew hadn't had any warning, which seemed likely, the outlook was bleak.</p>

The outer walls of the place were mostly rubble now, some spots still burning from small plasma-scorched fires; whether they were burning dry foliage, or equipment, or even bodies, I couldn't tell. But it still looked terrible. There were also dark pockmarks dotting the few pieces of wall still standing, and what I could clearly identify as dead Marines set against the backdrop there, red human blood sometimes mixing with the black of discharged Storm weaponry. The sight made my skin crawl, but unfortunately it was something I'd seen countless times throughout the war. It was the reason I needed meds now to keep the nightmares at bay.

Beside me, Willis didn't say a word in the face of the horror. I gently touched his shoulder.

"We should try to move fast, Will," I said softly. "Even if the Remnant's moved on, that doesn't mean they're not nearby, or that they might not come back."

I heard my husband swallow. "Right."

After scanning our surroundings for a good thirty seconds, we risked running over to the lowest section of crumbled wall and climbed our way through the leftover debris to get inside. I nearly gasped when I made it over, but thankfully held myself in check - another dead Marine lay on the other side, a plasma-seared hole straight through his neck just beneath his helmet. A second and third body were just a few feet away, torn up from an obvious explosive. Maybe a plasma grenade. I swallowed hard on the lump in my throat and tried to keep from gagging at the stench.

"Fuck, Natalie," Willis said behind me then as he cleared the downed wall himself. "This is...this looks awful."

I released a sigh. "I can't say I was expecting much after I heard the news. I know Colonel Dwight wouldn't've gone down without a fight. Unless something hit them hard and fast - which is what this looks like - Columbia wouldn't've fallen."

"Shit. We need to find Matt, now."

"Let's keep looking."

Coincidentally, the first place we ended up going through was the medical wing - it was the closest entry point from where we'd crossed the outer wall. The inside was a mess, with strewn equipment and broken medicine bottles and slashed IV bags everywhere. A few hospital beds were overturned, and two medics lay dead in a corner. Three patients stared up at the ceiling from their bunks, too, dead, and a jolt went through my heart again. This would've been my fate as

well if I'd stayed here.

It was much different to see it, rather than just hear the hypothetical notion when Willis had mentioned it earlier. I had to swallow down the bile in my throat a second time. Beside me, Willis said nothing. There wasn't really anything left to add.

"Damn those bastards," I muttered fiercely under my breath as we moved on.

Willis somehow heard me and replied, "Don't worry, Cooper. They'll get what's coming to them after this. We'll make sure of that. Especially if something's happened to my brother."

\* \* \*

><p>Going through the rest of the outpost wasn't as bad, since all the long rows of barracks that had housed Hayden's and my battalions were empty - and for that, I was grateful. Willis and I had already seen enough outside and in the medical wing. Still, when we finally made it to our old quarters, I had my husband stop for a minute before we continued on.</p>

"What's up, Coop?" he asked me.

"I need to grab a couple things I left in here," I answered. "Watch the door."

"Natalie - "

I gave him a look. "I won't be any good to anyone if I can't sleep, and wake up shaking and sobbing my guts out if I do. I need those pills." And the others, too, I thought to myself, although based on what Reynolds had said, I wasn't sure how much good they'd do Willis and I anymore. I still needed to talk to him about that as well, but first things first.

Much to my surprise, it seemed the rooms inside the barracks were mostly untouched - probably since they'd all been found empty by the invading Storm. I found my two pill bottles sitting on the table right where I'd left them before taking off for the assault on the rebel HQ. I quickly snatched them up, stuffed them in my pockets, and then stepped back outside. I nodded to Willis.

"All clear. We can go now."

We were just starting to move ahead in our search when we heard a sudden loud burst of gunfire outside. My husband and I exchanged a quick glance, then came rushing out, guns raised.

The two of us were left perplexed for a moment when we didn't see anything going on in the immediate vicinity. It was only when I happened to glance up at the observation platforms surrounding the outpost - also half-demolished now since the attack - that I spotted him. A slim figure running as he returned fire at the Elite and four Jackals on his tail.

I nudged Willis a little harder than I'd intended to this time.  
"Will, look up!"

Willis shifted his gaze just as I raised my DMR, trying to get a clear shot on the aliens pursuing what seemed to be the sole surviving Marine of the outpost. Willis brought his SMG up, too, just as I fired off my first burst.

It was hard to keep track of the rapid movements of the Elite, but he was the deadliest fighter for the Marine to face on his own, and so I hit that son of a bitch first. Steadying my rifle against my good shoulder, I rattled off four more bursts at the tall alien while Willis focused on the Jackals behind it. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched two of the smaller Storm troops buckle under my husband's muffled but relentless fire, getting thrown off the side of the platform with sharp cries from the force of the hits as the bullets tore into them. I had to admit that after what I'd seen here today, they were good sounds to hear.

In the meantime, the runner managed to squeeze off a quick burst at the Elite as well, and finally, between the two of us, its shield sputtered and died. While Willis held up his fire at the remaining Jackals, I quickly slung my rifle over my shoulder then and sprinted for the nearest metal ladder up to the platforms, hoping to intercept the Elite before it got too close to the Marine.

I climbed up the rungs like a monkey, too used to doing things like that under pressure between years of combat experience and obstacle course training, and had my DMR back in my hands in seconds once I reached the top. Swiveling towards the Elite, I went down on one knee in a rapid crouch just as another burst of fire came from the runner behind me, sailing over my head and hitting the formidable alien right in its gut. The Elite growled in rage, even more infuriated now that Willis had eliminated its last two Jackal followers from below, and now it threw its plasma weapon aside and started to charge.

It was only when I heard the hiss - and saw the sudden activation - of the alien's plasma sword that I really started to panic.

I got up and backpedalled fast, ignoring Willis's terrified shout of "\_Natalie!" from below, and squeezed off another two more tight bursts from my rifle. The Elite growled louder as bullets punctured its armor and slowed, but kept on coming. I was out of options now, and suddenly regretting my trip up here. Still, I wasn't going to give up, despite the odds, and I pulled the trigger at it again. But this time, all I heard was a deafening click click.

My heartbeat hammered in my ears and I rapidly dropped my weapon onto the platform with a metallic clang. Adrenaline pulsing through me, knowing the end was inevitable now, I reached for the pistol on my hip as a last resort, even though I knew I'd never be quick enough to fire it.

Turns out, though, that I didn't need it.

Just as the Elite began to swing his brilliant blue blade at my head, I ducked, shut my eyes tight, and waited to be sliced in two. That's when three sharp reports went through the forest, and I felt a hot liquid slap against my uniform, and a really, really heavy body drop to the floor in front of me. Then everything went absolutely quiet.

I didn't realize how hard I was breathing from the brief encounter

until I heard someone climbing up the ladder behind me, then rush up to tap my helmet. It was only then that I opened my eyes again, and I saw Willis crouched in front of me, visor raised and a wide grin on his face.

"Shit, Cooper," he said, breathing hard as well from his sprint up the stairs. "Promise me you won't do that again, all right?"

I blinked at him, still a little astonished that I was still alive, and saw the dead Elite body lying behind him. I gave him a questioning look. "How did you...?"

"Do that?" Willis finished. He picked up the sniper rifle from beside him that I hadn't noticed until now. "I panicked when I saw that Elite coming at you with his sword, and I knew the SMG wasn't going to do it. So I looked around me fast and saw one of the fallen Marines had this with him. A 99-S5. Picked it up and shot the bastard." His smile widened. "This time, instead of nearly killing you, this gun saved your life."

Pushing my own faceplate up now that I was more or less recovered from the shock, I threw my arms around my husband and kissed him. "No. You saved me with that. Thanks."

"Ahem."

Someone behind the two of us cleared his throat then, and my face went red as I remembered the Marine we'd been trying to save. I turned around and inched away from Willis a little.

"Who're you, Marine?" I asked. "And how the hell did you manage to survive all this?"

The young man pulled off his helmet then and flashed Willis and I both a grin.

"Well, it's a long story, Nat," Matthew Hawk replied. "But I think we're all used to that by now when it comes to me."

#### 41. Chapter 40: Contact

\*\*Chapter \*\*\*\*Forty: Contact\*\*

I knew how lucky we were to find Matthew for the second time, and I couldn't help but smile to myself as I watched my husband and his brother exchange a big hug. I wanted to embrace the kid myself as well, since I was just as relieved to see he was okay, but we were still in the presence of potential danger. While Willis and Matt were obviously distracted, I picked my discarded DMR back up, reloaded it, and crouched a few feet away from atop the platform to watch their six. I checked out our surroundings in normal vision first, then zoomed in with the scope. Strangely, there was nothing so far.

But after the hairy encounter we'd just had, that was fine by me.

"Cooper?"

"Yeah?"

Willis walked up behind me then and placed a hand on my good shoulder. "We should get moving, honey. Any Storm nearby would've heard those shots."

"My thoughts exactly," I replied, though I didn't get back to my feet just yet. Instead, I gestured with my gun and added, "Go ahead. I'll cover you guys while you climb down."

My husband snorted. "That's a negative, Major. You're going to go down this time, and I'll stay up and cover." He gave me a pointed look. "You already just broke your promise to me about trying to keep a lower profile."

I frowned up at him in a mock pout. "That's not fair, Will. You can't give me orders. I outrank you."

Behind us, Matthew snickered as he turned to face his older brother. "Is that true? Natalie outranks you?"

"Yeah. Shut up."

Matthew smirked this time. "That must make things...awkward. And doesn't that technically mean you're fraternizing with a superior off - "

"Boys, this isn't a safe place to have this discussion," I said seriously then. "Move."

Willis went serious, too. "Natalie, I'd really feel better if you just - "

"This is not up for debate. Both of you go, now."

I crouched there looking down the sights as the two brothers finally got into motion. I knew Willis's pseudo command was well-intentioned, out of wanting to keep me safe, but I wasn't comfortable leaving him or Matthew up here in my place. And any time we spent arguing over it was more time the Remnant had to discover us.

Once they were both safely on the ground, they watched my six from below as I climbed down myself.

"Okay," I said as I pulled my DMR into my hands again. "Back out the way we came. Matt, stay close to us."

"I will."

We took a more direct route to the outside this time, again climbing up and over a debris-riddled hole in what remained of the outer wall as we passed more bodies. The mood had sobered by then, and the three of us moved quietly back out of the ruined outpost. Just over the wall, I could see some mangled Storm corpses now - alien bastards the Marines here had taken down before getting killed themselves. Though it still saddened me to think of just how outmatched the UNSC forces that had fought here had been, it was good to see that they'd dished out some damage of their own as well.

It was Matthew that brought my attention to something as I was about to move on.

"Hey, Nat, check it out," he said, pointing to one of the dead Elites on the ground. "This guy's got the same gun as the one my brother killed to save you."

"That's nice, Matt, but we can't afford to stop for that," I responded, keeping my attention focused on the darkening trees around us. "Right now we need to get back to our perimeter. It's going to take a while and it's starting to get dark."

Beside me, Willis frowned. "Natalie, I think it's worth a look." He slung his SMG behind his back and crouched down to pick the weapon up, then hefted the thing up between his hands, testing its weight. "It's different than the guns we used to see during the war."

I finally gave in and leaned in closer for just a moment to inspect the new weapon myself. It took me a second, but then I recognized it - I'd seen another Elite using it recently, weeks ago aboard the Suave Affair when it'd been attacked out in space. I had no doubts that others may have used it in the battle we'd just fought at the rebel HQ as well, but that fight had been too chaotic to be able to notice such a small detail. I decided it was worth bringing to the attention of the spook.

"All right. Good find, kiddo," I said to Matt. "We'll bring this back to Lieutenant Lloyd and see what he makes of it."

Matthew was the one to frown this time, mirroring his brother's expression exactly except for the eyes. "Who's that?"

"Our spook," Willis answered.

"What's a spook?"

I couldn't help but roll my eyes as a small grin formed on my face. "All in due time, kid. You're starting to sound like your littlest nephew with all the questions. Let's go."

\* \* \*

><p>We'd only just started off in the direction of the HQ when the sun dipped completely below the horizon and left us in darkness. Willis and I just switched on our night vision in our HUDs, but I wondered if Matthew knew to do that. All the Marine gear was probably new to him.</p>

"Hey, guys," I finally heard him say behind us. "I don't think...I can't see anything."

Willis paused for a moment to turn back and help his brother. "Here, bro. This button up top. Hit it and the night vision suite will open up."

"I...oh. Thanks."

"Matt, where'd you get all that stuff, anyway?" I asked him. "I know Will said Colonel Dwight issued you some fatigues when you first arrived, but what about the gear?"

Matthew shrugged. "When the assault started up, I had to defend

myself. I didn't have shit in my room, so I followed the Marines to the armory. Picked myself up a helmet, a gun, some ammo, and armor. Nobody thought anything of it since I was wearing one of your guys' uniforms. I guess they all thought I was one of them."

Willis made a sound to my left. "That's going to change once we reach the rest of our unit, little brother. I don't want to leave you unprotected in case things go south, but you're not going to be actively fighting anymore. You're lucky you survived that attack in the first place."

My brother-in-law snorted. "I've already been through military-style training, you know. And a couple real skirmishes, too. I know how to use guns and stuff."

"You know how to use whatever old crap the rebels managed to scrounge for you, you mean," my husband retorted. "Things've gotten a little more sophisticated now, like you saw with the helmet. And I don't want you in the fray anyway."

"But Will, that's not fair! I can help you guys!"

I frowned in the dark. "Will's right, kiddo. We're in kind of a bind now if your reb friends don't want to join us. It could get ugly, and neither of us want to see you get hurt."

"I'm nineteen, and trained and able," Matthew said petulantly. "I can do what I want, and I don't need your permission."

Willis chuckled at that. "Actually, seeing as Coop's in charge of all of us now, you do need her permission to fight. Or to do anything else, for that matter."

"Really? So Nat, will you let me - "

"Hey!" I whispered fiercely then. "Both of you pipe down, now. I hear something."

I motioned for both to get down on one knee beside me, although being more experienced, Willis had already done so. Matthew positioned himself just behind us, assault rifle held diagonally across his middle with the barrel pointed down, looking alert for any sounds or movement. For all his talk, he seemed just as willing to let the professionals handle it rather than him.

Based on what he'd gone through back at Columbia, though, I didn't blame him. And I was grateful that at least in deed, he tried to respect the wishes of Willis and I. He was a good kid, if a little misguided sometimes.

"Cooper?" Willis asked me quietly then. "What do you hear?"

"Movement, straight ahead," I replied just as low. "Can't get a bead on anything yet, though. I'll keep trying."

"Damn. I wish I still had that sniper rifle. SMG doesn't help too much outside of close range."

"No, the sniper rifle wouldn't've done us any good, either. Too loud.

That thing's like a target on our back out here." I shifted my stance, continuing to scan the forest around us with my DMR. "We need to try to make it back without getting spotted. I'm sure the element that attacked Columbia's still out and about somewhere. We can't afford to run into them."

"Roger that. So what's the plan?"

"We keep moving forward for now, but slowly and quietly. Matt?"

"Yeah, Nat?"

"You got that, kiddo?"

"Yup."

"Okay, good. Let's keep going then."

It was just as I started to get up, however, that a sudden burst of bright pink, translucent needles came flying my way. My instinct was to duck, but knowing that Matthew was behind me and might get hit, I resisted the urge to jump to the side and pounced over him instead. My brother-in-law was beyond surprised, letting out a small yelp of astonishment and then groaning once we hit the ground. But the needles passed over us without finding flesh, slicing through the trees behind us and safely bursting against the tall trunks.

I rolled off Matt fast then and brought my weapon to bear as he continued to lay in the dirt, still attempting to get over his shock. In the meantime, Willis was already moving up on our flank, getting into range to let loose with a burst from his suppressed submachine gun. I figured he must have a better view of what was going on, so I opened up a private channel between the two of us so that I didn't have to shout across the woods and give away our position.

"Will? Enemy count? Who's up there?"

"Might be the rest of that patrol we ran into earlier, Coop!" he cried in return over the radio. "That lone Grunt by himself? These must be his buddies!"

"Okay, but give me a number."

"Two Elites, three Jackals, and two more Grunts," Willis responded. I heard a sound like he was licking his lips. "Get ready for a tough fight."

Shit, I thought to myself. Faced with those odds, at this point, there was a greater need to take out as many of the bastards as we could - as fast as we could - rather than trying to remain hidden. It was going to be hard, just like Willis had said, but I was sure the three of us could do it if we approached it the right way.

Still keeping my gun up, I turned back to Matthew and shook him. "I'm sorry, kiddo, but we're going to need you on this one. Hurry and get up. I need you to move up closer to your brother and help him at the front. I'll cover you guys back here." It wasn't my favorite position to be in, but I had the longer-range gun, while the two of them were equipped only with assault weapons. I steadied my aim and waited for

my brother-in-law to move up ahead.

"Will, heads up - Matt's coming up behind you."

My husband growled over the private channel. "Natalie, I thought I said - "

"We're not likely to survive this on our own. Let him help. I'll cover. You're free to open up as soon as you have a shot."

A long burst from Willis's submachine gun then started off the fireworks once more, and I quickly followed up by targeting one of the Jackals in the head as my still-stunned brother-in-law did as he was told. The birdlike alien dropped fast in a small spray of blood in the dark, and Willis brought down one of the Grunts just as quick while Matthew finally came up beside him. I paused for only a moment to watch the kid bring his gun up himself, and then I changed positions to get a better sight on the rest of the patrol through the trees.

Another Grunt and both Jackals were already down from the brothers' combined fire by the time I brought my DMR up on one of the Elites. So far, neither of the formidable aliens had sustained any damage, and that was a problem - because now, they were infuriated that the rest of their team had just been eliminated.

Or so I thought. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a third Grunt enter the picture now, perhaps the rear guard since we hadn't seen him before now, and a brightly lit plasma grenade suddenly came sailing across the forest. I quickly dove to the side, dropping my rifle in the dirt on accident, and wrapped my arms tight around my head. The grenade burst harmlessly against some shrub, but sent charred splinters of wood in every direction. I heard - and felt - a few pieces tink against my armor plates, yet thankfully, nothing went through where I was unprotected. I got back up in seconds, grabbing my gun as I went, and ran in a little closer, setting my sights on the little bastard now.

Turned out Matthew was faster, though. He and Willis both turned in the direction of the smaller alien that had just shown up and let loose on him for trying to kill me. The sound of my brother-in-law's MA5D rattled through the forest, like a signal flare sent up to attract the attention of other nearby enemies, but for now, it was needed. The Grunt was hit by one burst in the gut and another in the head, both at the same time, and it shrieked as its now-bloody and bullet-riddled body jerked back against the ground. It was dead.

"All right, nice work!" I said over the COM then, moving up a little more. "We just need to take on those Elites now. Be careful. Then we high-tail it out."

"Got it, Cooper," Willis replied.

A moment later, I was busy unloading on one of the bastards myself when I watched a grenade - one of our own this time - go flying towards the Elites. One managed to roll easily out of the way, shield flaring, while the other absorbed the explosion at the cost of his protective screen. I shifted my attention quickly to the one who was now unprotected, and fired off four rapid bursts at its head and

neck. Matthew rose a little higher from his own position and loosed a devastating hail of rounds himself, finishing the beast off. Now, there was only one left.

This was no time to breathe a sigh of relief, however. As I ducked low between the trees to reload, I saw Matthew doing the same - and that left just Willis to maintain the alien's focus while we scrambled to get back into the fight. I heard a long spray of gunfire heading for the Elite bastard, but he moved so fast that only a handful hit him - and even those just bounced off his shield. Before either Matthew or I could do anything about it, the creature had bounded over to Willis and slapped the SMG out of his hands, then gripped him roughly by the throat.

I heard the sounds of my husband getting choked over the COM, and sheer panic went through me.

"\_Willis!\_"

Not caring at all that I didn't have the appropriate weapon for the motion, I got up from my cover and sprinted over to help. Caught in desperate fear himself, Matthew had frozen in place, so I took it upon myself to steady my aim and fire at the Elite. Bullets bounced off its already taxed shield, but somehow, it still wasn't breaking. Frustrated, I gripped my rifle tight in my hands then and ran over to slam the butt of it into the alien's back.

That did the trick. I watched the Elite's shield sputter and die, and then, fast as a gunshot, I brought my sidearm out and squeezed the trigger into the alien's back point-blank. In front of me, Willis, struggling to free himself, pulled out a combat knife from its sheath at his hip and stuck it into the tall creature's neck. The Elite let out a warbling groan as my husband yanked the knife back out, then shoved it in again just as I fired off another shot, deep purple blood spurting everywhere.

And finally, the Elite was dead. It let out one final moan, streaming blood from its multiple wounds, and dropped Willis in a heap on the ground before falling to the dirt himself.

I was at Willis's side the moment the Storm troop breathed its last, a tight fear squeezing my chest.

"Honey?"

Matthew, still in shock himself, remained transfixed a few feet away. "Natalie? Is he okay?"

"I don't know!" I shouted, more out of panic than anything else. "Watch the trees!" The last thing we needed was to have another enemy patrol run in right now - and anyone around here would've heard those shots.

When I touched my husband's chest and he still didn't stir, I quickly pulled off his helmet to examine his face. It looked like he'd passed out just after he'd used the last of his energy to stab the Elite. There was dark bruising around his neck, and he had a splash of blood coming out of his nose and mouth from getting hit by the alien when it'd grabbed him so hard. I prayed he was okay as I tried to shake him awake.

"Will? Come on. Wake up."

There was still nothing. Alarmed, I pressed two fingers against his bruised neck, releasing a deep sigh of relief when I found that there was still a solid pulse there. Given the good sign, I tried the last thing I could think of to bring him back around - I pulled my canteen from my web belt, unscrewed the cap, and dumped some of the water out on his face.

Finally, Willis jerked awake, sputtering at the sudden flood of liquid on his face. I stopped pouring and grinned, even as he glared up at me once he was alert enough.

Wiping at the watery blood still blocking his airways, he said, "Jesus, Coop. I almost...choked...and now you're...trying to...drown me."

"All because I love you, honey," I said with a grin, then leaned down to kiss him, hard and full on the lips. After pulling back a bit, I ran a hand over his hair and said, "Feeling better?"

Slowly, a weak smile formed on his face, too. "Yeah. That's...a nicer way of...getting me up." He winced. "But my neck still...hurts."

"Those Elites have some powerful claws on them," I said. "I know. I got choked out too during the war. Not looking to experience that again."

My husband chuckled. "I hope you...don't, either."

It was Matthew that brought our attention back to the immediate situation. I was surprised to see that when I glanced up, he was standing over us now.

"Hey, guys, I hate to break up the love-fest you two've got going on here, but I think we should move," he said. "I don't want to run into more of those things." He nudged his brother lightly with his boot. "Glad you're okay though, bro."

"Yeah, me...too," Willis replied.

"Okay, come on. Matt's right. We need to get going before more Storm show up." I slipped a hand underneath my husband's arm, while Matthew did the same on the other side. "You ready to stand?"

"Yup."

On the count of three, the two of us pulled Willis back to his feet. Matthew let go right away, but I held on for a moment longer, waiting to see if he could handle it. Though he swayed a little at first, Willis eventually steadied.

"All right, I'm...good, Cooper. You can...let go now."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Let's...get moving. I just...want to...make it back and...go to sleep now. I've got a...headache."

I smiled at him. "That shouldn't be too hard to do. Maybe Doc'll give you some painkillers."

\* \* \*

><p>We made it back without any further run-ins after that - I think we'd all had enough for one evening. Although I had many other things lined up in my queue to take care of, along with Hayden, I helped Willis over to the makeshift medical tent my engineers had set up in my absence so he could get checked out first. In the meantime, Matthew sat outside, chowing down on an MRE while he waited for us to emerge. It reminded me that I was hungry now as well, but that, too, would have to wait.</p>

"So, Michael?" I asked while Willis got patched up. "How is he?"

Reynolds shrugged. "Just fine, ma'am. He'll have some marks on his neck for a while, and a headache, but all in all he made out pretty good. No broken bones or anything, nothing life-threatening going on. You can both rest easy."

"Thanks, Doc," Willis and I said.

"No problem. Those aspirins I gave you should be kicking in now, Captain. Let me know if you need more later."

"I will."

The medic left the tent then, leaving only Willis and I inside. I took his hand as I sat next to him.

"You scared me back there," I said in a low voice. "Don't do that again."

It was his turn to flash me a small grin. "You know I can't make any promises, Coop. The best either of us can do is try."

He gave my hand a squeeze, and I smiled a little in return. Then I took a deep breath.

"There's something I've been meaning to talk to you about, Will. I was just...waiting for us to have a minute alone. And not be getting shot at."

"Yeah? What's that?"

I swallowed, not sure how he'd react. This wasn't anything either of us had been expecting to have to deal with right now, but life was funny sometimes with its interjections. "I guess I'll just say it. There's a chance we might be looking down the barrel of baby number four."

My husband's eyebrows immediately shot up in surprise. "How? I thought you - "

"Doc's been giving me stuff for my wounds that reduces the pills' effectiveness and didn't tell me till now." I scratched my head with my free hand. "So after last night, I don't if...I might

be..."

Willis recovered fast from his shock and smiled at me, giving my hand another squeeze. "Hey. If it happens, it happens. We've made it through three kids so far, so one more won't be that bad. And it's very possible you're not." He leaned in a little closer. "In any case, I love you, Cooper. Don't worry about it."

Smiling a little myself at his words, I turned to give him a hug, and he wrapped his arms around me as I buried my face in his chest. "I love you, too, Will."

We sat that way for a while before he finally pulled back.

"You know what this means now, though, right?" he asked softly.

"What?" I replied.

"Everything I said to you earlier goes double now," he said. He took my hand again and looked at me. "Please, Coop. Stay safe."

#### 42. Chapter 41: Fool's Errand

\*\*Chapter Forty-One: Fool's Errand\*\*

\*\*0506 Hours, January 18, 2558. Near the City of Redwood Falls, Planet Khan. "The Pledge," Outer Colonies. Day Twenty-Nine of the New Age of Warfare\*\*

When I woke next, I could smell dry earth in my nostrils, and my wounded shoulder was giving me hell. So was my chest. I winced and rolled over onto my back, suddenly blinking up in surprise when I saw that a Marine in full gear was crouched over me.

My aide, Staff Sergeant Joshua Porter, gave me a sheepish grin in the dimly lit dawn.

"Sorry to wake you, Major, but you told me to make sure you were up by 0500 this morning. I just got off perimeter duty so I'm a few minutes late. My apologies, ma'am."

I waved him off sleepily as I sat up. "Don't worry about it, Staff. How're things looking on the lines?"

"Quiet, Major," the young noncom replied. "Not what I would've expected after yesterday, to be honest."

I snorted. "The cosmos has a way of keeping all of us on our toes, doesn't it?"

"Ma'am?"

"Nevermind, Josh. Thanks for getting me up. I'll take it from here."

"Yes, ma'am."

Pushing myself up all the way to my feet from the ground when I was

in this much pain was difficult, but I managed. Obviously whatever Doc had given me earlier for my heart was starting to wear off now. I'd have to go get a second dose from him soon. Pain was ripping through both my gunshot wounds now as my body was telling me in an alarming way that I wasn't ready to be up and about quite yet. But, with the circumstances being what they were, I didn't have much of a choice. I'd just have to suck it up for a little while longer.

Once I was standing, I dusted off my battledress uniform - covered in red dirt now as well as dried alien blood from a hard night's sleep in the forest - and then ran a quick hand through my hair before pulling on my helmet. Next, I leaned down to grab my DMR, still lying in the shallow foxhole I'd slept in, and moved to straighten again.

That's when I felt it - a sudden sharp twist in my chest, and then the pain hit tenfold. If at any point over the last two weeks I'd forgotten about my fateful run-in with the sniper, this was one hell of a reminder.

So I was forced to do what I'd already done many times during my career as a combat officer: change my plans on the fly. To Doc's it was.

I walked slowly over to the medical tent, where I'd been just hours ago the night before with Willis, getting him taken care of. Now, he was off somewhere with his pilots, while I found myself struggling to make it inside.

Reynolds was asleep on a cot when I stumbled in. What with the unshaven face and the dark circles under his eyes, I was willing to bet he'd just gotten that way. I hated to wake him up, but knew if I didn't, I risked my hide. And after the talk I'd just had with my husband yesterday, that wasn't something I wanted to let slide. For his sake, and for our family's.

Carefully, after setting down my helmet and gun nearby, I balanced on one boot while I gave the medic a nudge with the other.

"Hey, Doc. It's me. Wake up."

Slowly, Reynolds got up, running a hand through his short black hair before sliding it down across his face. "Uh, Major Cooper. Good morning. What..." He let out a tired sigh. "What can I do for you, ma'am?"

I finally sat down on a cot across from him since I was starting to feel a little dizzy. I was beginning to sweat, too, and it wasn't that hot out. Just like the last time this had happened. "I'm sorry to bug you again so soon, but...I really think I need another shot."

"Oh, right. Shit. You're overdue."

I wanted to come back with some retort like I'd figured that out on my own, but I found that I couldn't form the words. I only felt some semblance of relief when he produced the vial of medicine and stuck me with it. I sat there for about a minute before the symptoms dissipated.

"So...I take it I'm going to need daily injections now?" I asked as I rubbed at my chest.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm afraid so. If you want to be up and running so soon after what you endured, this is what it's going to take." He lifted an eyebrow at me. "I told you I wouldn't advise you to take this route."

I snorted. "It's not like I have a choice. Can't leave it all to Hayden. He's my best friend, but sometimes he doesn't quite get the meaning of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'. Or its benefit." And I knew for sure that that was the only way to try to even out the odds between us and the Storm, at least here on the mainland. It was an alliance we had to attempt.

"Well, that's between you and him, ma'am. I'm just here to follow orders and patch people up." He paused for a moment. "Which reminds me. You're still taking your other meds?"

"Haven't yet this morning, why?"

"Keep the ones you're taking for the PTSD, but I'd hold off on the birth control ones until you know for sure what's going on. I have some alternative contraceptives for you to use in the meantime that are safer in case you've conceived, but will still prevent that from happening if you haven't."

Though I knew the limbo of the next few weeks was going to kill me, I still couldn't help but chuckle at that. "Thanks, Doc, but I really don't think I'm going to see much action in the near future. Not that kind, anyway. Not with everything going on right now. Too much shit to deal with."

He shrugged. "You never know, and it's good to have all your bases covered. Only problem is that I don't have a decent supply anymore since Columbia was destroyed. Your husband might have to get more from the Affair next time he gets sent up."

"Right. We'll, uh...we'll handle it."

The medic seemed just as eager as me to change the subject. "So, uh, with the shot, you should be good to go for another twelve hours, ma'am. If you start feeling any other symptoms, though, let me know."

"I will, Doc." I picked my helmet and rifle back up and stood. "And thanks, again."

"No problem, Major." He shifted his weight uncomfortably. "And I'm sorry, again, about not...informing you sooner of the side effects."

"Well, worse comes to worst, I guess I'll get sent back up to the Affair in a few weeks and just let Major Hayden handle things down here how he likes, and wait to go home. I would've much rather been down here with my Marines, but I'm not going to risk losing another kid." I swallowed hard on the sudden lump in my throat, my voice going rough. "For something like that, once is enough."

\* \* \*

><p>Now that I was upright again, and not on the verge of passing out in pain, I made my way through the secure perimeter towards the command tent, where I was sure to find the spook. He was probably getting ready to head out to Qamar Island with Willis's wingmate. I knew I'd have to hurry if I wanted to catch him before he left.<p>

As soon as I stepped inside, though, I found Major Oliver Hayden standing there with his XO, going over something on my friend's datapad. They glanced up when I came in.

"Cooper," Hayden said to me with a nod.

"Oliver," I said in return. I folded my arms across my chest.  
"Something happen while I was asleep?"

He shook his head as he waved off his second-in-command. "Nope. It's been quieter than expected, actually. And that's what worries me."

"It should. You were right yesterday, you know. When Willis and I made it back to the outpost - what was left of it, anyway - we hit alien resistance more than once."

"Heavy?"

"Yeah. My husband's got the bruises on his neck to prove it, and I almost got truncated by a plasma sword. The rest of the time we did what we could to stay out of sight."

Hayden flashed me a grin, though it was a small one. "Sounds like an eventful evening."

A corner of my lips curled upward, too. "It was, but not a very fun one."

My best friend's smile faded after a moment as he braced himself against the small table in the center, letting out a sigh. "Well, in any case, it's time now. We need to make a decision about where to go from here. We got lucky last night that we were left alone, but I'm not keeping my fingers crossed that that'll be the case much longer."

"I agree. We need a plan."

"You still thinking about going on the offensive?"

I nodded. "The best way to not get caught with your pants down is to catch the enemy with theirs. Who do you have on patrol right now?"

"One of the platoons from my D Company. Why?"

"If it were me, I'd send the rest of D out as well. Have them fan out, do a little recon of the area, probe the Storm's lines, and see if they can get us a clearer estimate on numbers - and maybe if they've set up shop somewhere like us. It'd be useful intel to have before we all go out in force."

"Okay. That'll take care of the Remnant problem." He turned to give me a look. "What about the insurgents, though?"

I released a sigh. "You know how I feel about that. The numbers we'll get back on the Storm will be huge, if the battle and skirmishes we fought yesterday are any indication. What I saw at Outpost Columbia was even worse. We could really use the extra manpower."

Hayden took that in with a frown. He was quiet for a long time, contemplating, before he said, "\_If\_ I consider this, how do you plan on going about making the offer of a truce to them anyway? We don't even know where they've holed up now."

"I have some ideas about that. And a pretty good source I can use to narrow it down, too. It shouldn't be too hard to get an audience."

My best friend raised an eyebrow at me. "Natalie? You're sure you want to try this again, after what they did to you?"

"It's not them. It was that son of a bitch Laraza. And I'm sure."

"Why?" he pressed.

"Because I saw that when shit hit the fan yesterday with the aliens and they were scared, they didn't care whether the person shouting orders at them was a fellow reb or a Marine. They just cared that it was human. They want the Remnant gone off the mainland as much as we want them to be. Both sides need each other's help again." It was my turn to give Hayden a look this time. "This is bigger than our own inter-human crap now, Hayden. With their increasing numbers, we could lose what's left of Khan over this to the Storm. And the rebels know it."

The other major's frown deepened, like I'd just revealed an element of the situation that he hadn't considered before. "Is that what you think the aliens are aiming for now? You think they're trying to take control of the planet?"

"Yeah, I do," I answered without hesitation. "Just look at the numbers they've built up, and how aggressive their attacks are getting, and how far they've suddenly spread themselves." I snorted. "They wiped both Columbia and the rebs' HQ right off the map. They couldn't make their intentions any clearer if they held up a neon sign for us to read. And I know that it's all got to do with whatever the hell they've found on that island."

\* \* \*

><p>Navy Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd was gearing up in the far corner of the command tent when I found him. He'd just finished stuffing his pack full to the brim and was busy slinging a battle rifle behind his back when I approached.</p>

"Hey, Caleb," I said to him. "Got a minute?"

In lieu of a salute, he stood up straighter when he saw who it was. "Major Cooper, ma'am. What do you need?"

"I wanted to show you something before you left. I think the Storm might've come up with a new plaything since the war ended."

"Yeah? Show me. If you would, Major."

I had the spook follow me to the other side of the tent, where I'd left the new alien weapon Willis had picked up from the outpost last night. Hefting it in my hands, I could feel its weight, and held it out for the lieutenant to see. "This. I saw it once before when we got boarded on the Affair, but never earlier than that. My husband found it again at Columbia yesterday. Thought I'd show you and see if you could tell us what it is."

Carefully, Lieutenant Lloyd took the gun in his hands and studied it, turning it over a few times as he looked. Then, finally, he snorted to himself.

"Yes, ma'am," he responded. "I've seen these before, too, on another mission. Nasty thing."

"And?"

"It's a Storm rifle, Major. Or at least that's what the Office has dubbed them. Don't know what the Sangheili call it. But I guess that's probably irrelevant when you get caught in the crosshairs."

"An answer to our SAW, then?"

"Kind of. It's got more kick to it than the plasma rifles we were used to seeing during the war. A better gun, in my opinion." He set the weapon down at his feet, then met my gaze. "Either way, it's not something you want to get shot by. At least now you know."

"Yeah. Thanks, Lieutenant."

"Anytime, ma'am." He paused for a moment, then said, "And Major?"

I turned to face him again.

He suddenly had a sheepish expression on his face. "Nobody really calls me Caleb, ma'am. It's always just been Cal. My dad said even my mom used to call me that when I was first born."

I smiled in return. "No Caleb, huh? Then Cal it is." I stuck out my hand to him. "Good luck out there today, Lieutenant."

He took my hand and shook it, smiling himself now. "You, too, Major."

\* \* \*

><p>The spook had just taken off when Major Hayden caught me as I was leaving the command tent to head back outside. He looked tired, and I wondered how many shifts he'd just spent without sleeping. I knew it was time for him to rack out, and for me to take over for a while.</p>

Before he opened his mouth to speak, I said, "I got this, buddy. Go ahead and get some rest. I bet you didn't sleep the whole night."

My best friend snorted. "You're right, but that's not why I stopped you." He brought a hand up to the side of his jaw and scratched. "I've been thinking about what you said. About the Storm, and the rebels." He sighed. "Much as I hate to say it, I think you could be right. Maybe this is our only solution."

"So?"

"I'm okay with you trying your hand at getting the rebs to join us." He gave my good shoulder a pat as he walked past. "Just don't let 'em shoot you in the back again, Cooper. Good night."

#### 43. Chapter 42: Better the Devil You Know

\*\*Chapter Forty-Two: Better the Devil You Know\*\*

While Major Oliver Hayden caught some zees, I spent the next hour putting my battalion's engineers to work fortifying our perimeter in case of a premature attack by the Storm, and rotating the watch. Only once those immediate issues were addressed did I finally leave the command tent to seek out my aide again - as well as my brother-in-law - to help out with tracking down the rebels. I needed to speak to their leader about teaming up now, before the ex-Covies showed up at our doorstep a second time.

Although I was iffy about bringing Matthew along - I knew Willis wouldn't approve - I couldn't deny that I needed him specifically on this task in order for it to work. Since he wasn't presently around to talk to, I just had to hope that my husband would understand, and that this wouldn't spark yet another fight between us about his brother. My aide, on the other hand, was coming strictly for security. I wasn't looking to get riddled with bullets today.

Once the two of them were assembled, I pulled my helmet on before stepping outside and opened up a private channel to my XO.

"Harris? This is Cooper."

"Major?" came the near-instant reply.

"I'm off on a diplomatic mission of sorts for a bit, and Major Hayden's getting some downtime. I need you to keep an eye on things while I'm gone. I won't be long."

"Will do, ma'am."

"If anything happens, though - and I mean anything - I want to be notified immediately. I'm just a COM click away, and I can be back ASAP if you need me. I don't want you working this on your own. It's above your pay grade." For that matter, it was above mine, too, and Hayden's. But at least we weren't too far down the chain, unlike the captain. "Got it, Shawn?"

"Understood, Major."

"Good. Barring any problems, I should return within the hour. Cooper out."

As soon as I cut the connection, I turned back to Staff Sergeant Porter and Matt. For this outing, I'd had my aide leave his SAW behind, for obvious reasons; he'd instead chosen to bring the more compact SMG along. We weren't going to look too friendly lugging around a light machine gun. Matthew, as always, had his MA5D assault rifle with him.

"Boys?" I asked then. "We ready to move out?"

"Yes, ma'am," Porter answered.

"Yeah," my brother-in-law said.

"Okay, let's get moving then. Matt, you lead the way."

\* \* \*

><p>I was surprised to find that for once, the weather here on Khan seemed to be changing. Instead of the usual bright and cheery blue sky we were used to having in the forest, as we walked, the light from the sun seemed to dim a bit and some gray clouds rolled in. It looked like a downpour was imminent. I hoped that wasn't an omen.</p>

"Ma'am," Staff Sergeant Porter said behind me, holding his gun loosely as he glanced up at the sky. "Looks like the weather's turning on us."

"Yeah, it does, Josh," I answered. "Not much we can do about that, though. We couldn't've asked for anything better all the weeks we've already been here. It had to change sometime."

The staff sergeant chuckled. "Guess so, ma'am."

I frowned then as I realized we were approaching what looked like a camp up ahead. Matthew's directions had been nothing if not spot-on. I unconsciously gripped my DMR tighter. "All right, Staff, stay sharp. I'm really not sure what to expect here, or what kind of reception we'll get. And we're terribly outnumbered if shit really hits the fan. So...just look as docile as possible."

"Roger that."

"Matt?"

"Yeah, Nat?"

"What now?" I asked him through the COM, slowly coming to a halt. "We wave a white flag or something? What do you think'll work here?"

"Well...what worked for you during the fight?"

"The Storm bombarding the hell out of all of us."

Matthew snorted. "I'm guessing that's not something we can ask the aliens to do again to give us a hand here."

"Nope. But you guys must have radios, right?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Okay," I said with a sigh then. "General broadcast it is."

Taking care to find some cover first near Matt, I clicked on the general channel, while Porter brought his gun up out of sight to watch us. In my head, I prayed silently that this wouldn't start a nasty skirmish we'd have to retreat from in a hurry.

"Attention insurgent forces. This is Major Natalie M. Cooper, UNSC Marines," I said in a firm voice. "I'm here with two of my men only, in peace. We'd like to speak to your commander."

A familiar chuckle sounded over the channel in response.

"Major Cooper. It is good to see you are alive and well," Javier Laraza replied. "I heard you had a terrible run-in with those pesky Jackal pirates. I am glad that your Marines managed to dispose of their presence following your grave injury. We were very grateful for the assistance."

I felt my blood boil in an instant. It was the mayor. The same bastard that had had me shot, and the man both my brother-in-law and the spook had assured me wasn't the one at the helm of the rebels - although many of us had had our suspicions about that all along. I should've been more surprised given the intel I'd received, but I wasn't. I was sure the shifty son of a bitch kept to the shadows and did everything behind the scenes - behind some marionette of his that was there only to appear to be in charge of things.

Fuck, I thought. I wasn't so sure anymore that an alliance would work. Nor that it'd even be honored if one were made.

But I was here now, and I had try. For all our sakes. I took a deep breath.

"Yes," I replied through gritted teeth. "That was an unfortunate incident. Thankfully, we have some exceptional medics with us that were able to save my life."

"How fortuitous for you, Major. Now, what do you wish to speak to me about?"

I crouched low, keeping the barrel of my own weapon pointed down as I held it across my middle, but watching the trees for any sign of motion. Another sniper shot would do me in for sure; I'd only barely survived the last two. Again, I swallowed down my anger and spoke.

"I have a proposal for you, sir. I'd like to run it by you in person if I could. General channels are easy to crack."

The mayor let out a guffaw. "And who do you suppose will be listening?"

"The Storm, Mr. Laraza. They're still out here. In force." I shifted my stance a bit, hoping I had him now. "Some know our language now since the war. They can hear our plans. And if nothing else, they'll get a solid tag on your location through this broadcast."

"I...see."

"That's why I think something off the radar would be best."

There was a long pause on the other end, then, "And how do I know you're not here to kill me? You are armed, I presume."

"I am. So are my two subordinates. But we're just three people, and we know that any shot we take is likely to cost us our lives. You have hundreds of men at your back here, so we'd be pretty stupid to try anything."

Another extended silence as he considered. "Very well, Major. Let us have this discussion, then. I am curious to hear your plan. You have my word that so long as no harm comes to myself, or any of my men, you will not be harmed, either. At least as long as you are here."

"All right. I accept that." I took a risk by slinging my rifle, then quietly motioned for Porter and Matthew to do the same. "We'll be coming up on your camp now, to the west. I want to be sure your men are notified before we move so we don't get shot - by accident."  
\_Accident my ass,\_ I thought to myself.

"Of course, Major. I'll let them know now. You're free to come forward when you wish."

Although it made me edgy, I waved Matthew and the staff sergeant forward as I stepped out ahead of both. I was starting to think this had been a bad idea, that maybe my best friend was right. But with the odds we faced, we couldn't all afford to be split up like before if we wanted to keep Khan under human control. So I moved up.

A lot of the rebs eyed us suspiciously as we stepped into - and then through - their perimeter. We eyed them right back. Yet thankfully, no one made any move that was untoward. We passed through without problems, then got approached by a black-haired woman who looked to be a little older than me, maybe in her mid-thirties. She held an older model MA5C in her hands, though the barrel was pointed down.

"Major Cooper?"

I stared back at her. "Yeah, that's me."

"I'm Giovanna Torri, second-in-command here at the camp. I'll take you to see Colonel Laraza."

"\_Colonel\_?" I asked.

She smiled slightly, but it wasn't out of friendliness. "Yes. Our mayor wears many hats."

"Should've known," I muttered under my breath.

"What was that?"

"Nothing, ma'am. You lead, we'll follow."

The woman in fatigues frowned for a moment, but eventually turned and led us straight to a tent set up in the middle of the insurgent camp - not unlike our own, except that it looked more worn than ours, like most of their equipment. She opened the flap for us and gestured that we go in.

"Go ahead. He's waiting for you."

Only I misinterpreted the motion. Apparently, the mayor just wanted me inside.

"No," I heard him say from the tent. "Only the major, Torri. The other two can wait outside."

I took one last look at my brother-in-law and Staff Sergeant Porter, then walked into the tent. Javier Laraza looked the same as always, sitting behind a desk with his hands clasped in his lap. The only difference this time was that he was in fatigues, too. He smirked at me.

"Major Cooper. It's been some time."

I folded my arms across my chest and swallowed down the urge to hit him. "Listen. I'm not here to chit-chat with you. I'm here because of the Storm. You have to know they're out here - and that they're a huge threat to all of us."

Laraza scoffed. "Of course I know. They destroyed our base while your Marines were busy attempting to slaughter us."

"As they did ours while your men tried to do the same to mine." I let out a sigh. "Obviously, whatever we're doing on our own against them isn't enough."

"What are you proposing, then?"

"An alliance between our two factions. A way for all of us to survive, and to make sure those alien bastards don't take the planet."

"And why should I accept?"

I was beginning to grow frustrated. I ran a quick hand through my hair and said, "Because if you don't, when the Storm strike again - and they will - we'll get eradicated. Their numbers now that they're on the mainland far exceed whatever you and I can come up with individually. Together, we've got a shot to push them back to the island."

"Qamar, you mean," he said.

"Yes. You've known they were there this whole time?"

He waved a dismissive hand at me in irritation. "Of course we did. We simply did not have the resources to do anything about it. So as long as they did not threaten us, and remained few in number, I did not see the need to act."

I snorted. "Well that backfired, didn't it?"

"Do not mock me, Major, or I will throw you out and have you shot again."

"So you admit it was you then, huh?"

The mayor let out an exasperated sigh as he thrust a hand over his graying hair. I sighed again, too.

"Look. This is something I can look past if you decide to help us now. It's really to your own benefit. And your people's. Do you want Khan in the Remnant's hands?"

"I do not want the aid of the UNSC," he spat.

"Then you're fucked," I said heatedly. "And so is the civilian population you're supposedly serving and protecting. But if you don't want this, I'll leave."

Laraza surprised me then by standing straight up from his seat. "No, wait! Why can we not discuss this?"

I stepped up a little closer. "Because you tried to kill me. And you just said you don't want our help. You want us off Khan so bad? You're going to have to help us drive out the Storm first. Just like I'm forced to work with you. Otherwise there won't be a planet for you to knock us off of. It'll be theirs."

That seemed to finally get to him. It'd taken a while, but understanding - and resignation - finally flashed across his features. Laraza sat down in his chair again and carefully intertwined his fingers in front of him on his desk.

"Very well, Major. It appears this is the only way...for now. But what of the accomodations? And what will occur after the battle? My men and I - as well as this city - still wish Khan to be free of UNSC influence. And their personnel."

I shrugged. "I can't promise you what'll happen when the fight's over. That goes above my head. What I can promise you, though, is that you won't have an army of bloodthirsty aliens in your backyard."

He looked chagrined. "We replace one enemy with another, then."

"Would you rather a guaranteed death, or the possibility of an undisturbed future?" I asked calmly. "It's up to you."

"Fine. We shall fight the Remnant together. But what of our camp?"

"We don't have to integrate our forces, or even be close to one another. We just have to be willing to cooperate and have each other's backs when the time comes." I unfolded my arms then and slipped a thumb underneath the strap of my DMR on my shoulder. "I'll be planning an assault against the aliens that could begin as early as tonight. All I ask is that your men be ready to move."

The mayor nodded. "Then it is decided." He pointed to the tent flap at the entrance. "You and your Marines may go now, Major. I will keep

in contact."

As soon as I walked out, it felt like I'd finally released a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. Somehow, I'd managed to secure the rebels' cooperation. They must've been more worried than Laraza wanted to show.

But then again, so were we.

It was Staff Sergeant Porter who approached me first as I pulled my helmet back on. Matthew moved closer too to hear the answer.

"So, ma'am? How did it go?"

"Well, we've got ourselves a truce, for now. And an alliance. The rebs are going to help us out against the Storm, at least here on the mainland."

"And after that, Major?"

I blew out a breath as we reached the edges of the perimeter once more. "I don't know, Josh. That's as far as we got right now, and it's probably all we should plan for at this point. It's going to be tough to drive out the ex-Covies, even with their help."

"But at least you've only got one enemy to deal with instead of two," Matthew put in.

I chuckled weakly. "Hopefully, kiddo. If your buddies keep their word."

That's when all three of us - as well as the rebels in the camp - were suddenly startled by a bright flash of light that swept the darkened sky outside. I half-expected everyone to draw their weapons, but the locals knew it wasn't us. It wasn't even the Remnant.

It was just lightning. Nature.

We all heard the thunderclap a few seconds later. Then, it started to rain.

#### 44. Chapter 43: At a Moment's Notice

\*\*Chapter Forty-Three: At a Moment's Notice\*\*

\*\*\*\*2034 Hours, January 18, 2558. Near the City of Redwood Falls, Planet Khan. "The Beginning," Outer Colonies. Day Twenty-Nine of the New Age of Warfare\*\*\*\*

It surprised me how cold the water felt as it soaked every part of me - my hair, my uniform, my fingers. I struggled to see past the droplets of rain coming down all over me, struggled to breathe past the blood pouring out my nose and mouth. And my old gunshot wounds were probably the worst. I'd gone fifteen hours now without another dose of medicine for them - three hours too much - and the pain was excruciating.

But still not as much as what had just happened. What I'd just seen unfold before my eyes.

Crouched on all fours in the mud, unable to get up on my own, I blinked past the water covering my face and dug my hands into the earth. I didn't know where my helmet was, or my gun anymore. All I knew was that it'd been a long time since I'd felt this anguished, this empty...and this damn helpless.

\*\*Eight Hours Earlier\*\*

"So we get to fight the Storm during a thunderstorm, huh?" Hayden said to me with a small grin as we both stood around the table in the middle of the command tent. "That's kind of poetic."

I couldn't help but chuckle, despite the circumstances. "You always see the bright side, don't you?"

"Well, I'll admit that that's tough after getting woken up to the sound of thunder after three hours of sleep and getting absolutely pounred on, but I try."

"Uh, sir, ma'am, if I may," my XO, Captain Shawn Harris, interrupted then.

I nodded at him, going serious now. "Go ahead, Captain."

"Major Hayden's XO has been feeding me back reports on D Company's progress while you two were out," Harris replied. "It looks like our initial estimates are correct. We've got a whole lot of ex-Covies to deal with here, ma'am."

"Okay. We were expecting that. How are they deployed?"

The captain shook his head. "All over, Major, but for now, they're keeping mostly to the woods rather than the city. Almost like they don't even want to bother with the civvies."

Oliver gave a snort beside me. "Not yet, anyway. Because they know they're easy pickings once us and the rebs are out of the picture. It's not like the alien bastards were famous for sparing innocent people's lives during the war."

"No, sir, but all things point to something strange being afoot here. With respect, I'd recommend our assault begin immediately."

"I agree," I said. "I'm not so much interested in what they're up to on the mainland as I am making sure they don't wipe us - and the city - out clean. Hayden?"

My best friend considered the holographic projection of Khan in front of us on the table, coming from his datapad. Finally, he scratched his head and let out a sigh. "This'll be kind of like the start of this mission, Cooper. We'd be going in a little blind."

"We know their numbers, and we know they've got most of the forest covered. And we've got the rebels' help." I smirked. "The one good thing about being surrounded is that you can fire at all sides and always hit your target."

"Right," the other major said. "So it's now or never, huh?"

"Yeah."

He nodded. "All right, Cooper. We'll do this your way, then, and hope it works." He looked me in the eyes. "Our birds are already in the air, so let's get the insurgents in on this and get started."

\* \* \*

><p>Assembling this many troops was something I'd never done before in my career. I'd always thought that simply handling a full battalion on my own would be tough - and it was at times - but this was different. A battle on this large of a scale was something I'd never attempted to plan for - or tried to coordinate myself. Good thing I had my best friend's help. Two minds were greater than one when you were forced to take control of a situation far beyond what you'd been trained for and had prepared to do.</p>

And just before I left the command tent, I clutched something else in my hand that I hoped would help me see it through, too: a family picture of me, Willis, Gabriel, Liam, and Olivia, and another of just Gabe and the twins. I stared down at the photo of my three kids for a moment, kissed it, and then quickly put it back inside my helmet's padding. Then I pulled the bucket onto my head and walked outside into the downpour.

It was still raining hard, and although I'd managed to get a little drier while inside the tent, my uniform and gear were all immediately drenched again. A fleeting glance up at the sky revealed nothing but dark clouds hanging over us, and then there was another flash of light, followed by a sharp clap of thunder. It didn't look like the weather was going to clear up anytime soon. In fact, it only seemed to be getting worse.

But crouched in front of me now, all assembled, were the two battalions of men and women my best friend and I were jointly in charge of - along with the UNSC pilots in the air, and the large unit of rebels we were going to incorporate as well. All of their lives - and the ultimate fate of Khan - rested squarely on our shoulders.

I was a bit startled despite myself when I felt someone step up beside me then and grip my good shoulder. I turned to see that it was Hayden, but I couldn't see his expression behind his visor. I heard the light tone in his voice, though.

"Crazy, huh?" he asked. "You ever thought we'd get this far up the chain?"

I shook my head. "No. Not this fast. And definitely not like this." I shifted my stance a bit. "I gotta admit, I'm a little nervous."

"Yeah?" He smirked. "Is now a bad time to tell you I think I just crapped my pants?"

I laughed and gave him a small shove. "Well, it can't be worse than Voi, right? Least there's no Flood to fight this time."

"Nope, but we might find something just as bad on that island," my best friend said seriously then. "You never know. What we do know

is that the Remnant's up to something huge over there given how they've been acting around here lately."

"Don't I know it. But there's only one way to find out, and it starts with clearing out our own backyard first." I shot him a look as I gripped my DMR against my middle. "You ready?"

"To be honest, I could use a stiff drink first."

I grinned briefly beneath my faceplate again. "Me, too, buddy. We'll have to save it for when we're safely back on Earth, though." If I can still drink at that point, I amended to myself. "Come on."

My friend took several steps forward then, and I followed. I heard him suck in a deep breath over our private COM before broadcasting on the general channel.

"Marines, this is Major Hayden. Today's a big day. We're going to finally go after those alien bastards that destroyed our outpost in a cowardly assault that killed so many of our men and women - and we're going to make sure that the same thing doesn't happen to the city of Redwood Falls, its people, and the planet.

"I won't lie to you. It's going to be tough. We'll have air support, but no armor due to the terrain. We don't know how yet, but the Storm's been increasing their numbers ever since we've arrived. It's a large unit we're going to have to take down, it'll be grueling, and the fight won't end here. But it'll be a start, and it'll ensure the safety of the citizens on Khan - as well as keep the planet in human hands. For that, we're taking a step in a new direction and allowing the local militia to help." He let out a sigh. "You know them as rebels, as the enemy, but going forward, we're going to fight together to beat back the Remnant. Just like our forces did during the war. Humanity comes first, and it's up to us to save this colony. Oorah?"

"Oorah, sir!"

I opened up a separate channel myself then, to the insurgents' side. "This is Major Cooper, UNSC Marines. I know we haven't always been friendly, and more often than not, we've been disdainful of each other's presence here on Khan. But today, we fight as one unit, for humanity and for the planet. Let's beat back the Storm together like we did when they were still the Covenant, so that your colony may continue to remain in your hands, and so that you can live here in peace and security. To do that, remember that we'll have to trust each other and work as a team if this is going to work." I paused, then added, "The Marines've got your back. Let's get this show on the road."

\* \* \*

><p>It didn't take long to find where the Remnant was hiding. As we'd been hearing in a number of reports, they were spread out nearly everywhere in the forest now, so initial contact happened even sooner than all of us had been expecting going out.</p>

But that didn't mean we weren't ready for them. I keyed the COM.

"All units, this is Major Cooper. Standby. We've got our air support rolling through. Do not push up until you receive the order. Kilo's coming in hot." Quickly switching to my private connection with Willis, I said, "Talon? You ready to set off some fireworks?"

"Yes, ma'am. Visibility's bad so we're going off the electronics. Keep your heads down and stay safe."

"We'll do our best," I replied. "And you, too, honey," I added softly.

"Always, Coop."

I hunkered down fully then and got into position, taking cover behind one of the tall, wide redwood trunks in the forest along with three other Marines. The rain was relentless, soaking me right down to my boots, but I kept a steady grip on my weapon and waited. I was lost in watching the small drops of water roll down my visor when I first heard the sound.

The thrill of listening to high-powered air support coming in to help soften up the target was always a welcome thing. Grinning inside my helmet, hoping the Storm was caught in the open and shot to shit, I felt a trio of successive blasts hit the ground and trees several hundred meters ahead of us. Huge pieces of branches fell down in an instant, others were blown apart, still others sparked fire but were quickly snuffed out by the rain.

And somewhere up there, I heard the muffled shrieks and cries of the aliens. That was the real prize.

"All right, Major," Willis said over the COM then, sounding a little out of breath. Probably from the excitement, or fear. Or likely both. "Pass one complete. We'll do another with the rest of the pilots, and then it's your show for a while."

"Acknowledged. Nice work so far, Talon. Tell your flyboys, too."

"I will. But we've got a long way to go still, Cooper. Standby."

Soon another hypersonic rumble went through the trees, louder this time. They were flying lower. My teeth rattled inside my helmet as I huddled up against the redwood trunk, multiple detonations going off ahead of us at the same time. With the number and power of each blast, it was a wonder anything was left over there. Gray-orange clouds of debris burst high into the air, up and out, demolishing even more of the forest - and hopefully enemy troops as well. Even before the smoke cleared, I found myself smiling wider.

"Holy shit!" I said. "Talon, that was - "

"Watch it!" he suddenly cut me off. "Banshees inbound!"

No sooner had I been congratulating my husband and his squadron on their efforts than a whole group of alien aircraft came swooping in through the storm. Ignoring the human pilots flying off after a successful bombing run, they instead set their sights on us ground troops first. Since we hadn't seen any Banshees in our fight before at the rebel HQ, we were all caught completely unawares.

"Marines, get down, \_now\_!" I heard Hayden shout over the COM.

But there was nowhere to go in the woods. Superheated plasma cannon fire rained down on us for the next terrifying twenty seconds, smashing into the trees above us, pounding hard and deep into the earth, and vaporizing the drops of water as they fell to the ground. Most awful, however, was the devastation it all left behind. There were black craters and large shards of wood everywhere, blown off fragments of smaller flora - and several unmoving human bodies left in the wake.

Just in front of me, I could see a group of huddled Marines behind a thick trunk up ahead - and directly before them was a newly felled branch that had crushed one rebel soldier and a huge, bombed out blast crater that had killed four others. There wasn't a whole lot of blood on the ground thanks to the nature of the plasma rounds, but none of the two men and two women had a complete set of limbs anymore. Marine or insurgent didn't matter. It was still a harsh sight to take in.

Although I could see with frightening clarity all that was going on around me, it took a while for my hearing to return. When it did, I was inundated with COM traffic, heightening the sense of anxiousness and urgency in the air after the bombing run.

"Oh, God, oh God! My arm!"

"Second platoon, status, now!"

"We need a medic over here!"

"Christ, they're all de - !"

"Major? \_Major\_!"

The fifth wasn't a distant voice on the radio, but a live person standing beside me. Staff Sergeant Joshua Porter briefly lifted his faceplate and looked at me, clutching his SAW in his hands.

"Ma'am? Are you okay?"

Slowly, I found myself nodding. "Fine, Josh." I swallowed. "What's the story on that run? How many casualties?"

"About half a platoon's worth of men wiped out, ma'am," my aide reported solemnly. "Not all from the same unit, Marines and rebels among them."

"Son of a \_bitch\_."

"Cooper, heads up!" Major Hayden said over the COM then. "We've got another group of Banshees on approach!"

"Shit! Everyone take cover!" I shouted over the general channel.

I saw another natural flash of light and the boom of thunder as I hunkered down again, but it was all quickly overtaken by the artificial firestorm unleashed through the forest by the Remnant. As what felt like wave after wave of a green inferno swept its way

across the terrain, all I could do was grip my helmet and rifle and hug the dirt - and pray like hell that it would end soon. When it was over, I again heard dozens of voices and screams over the COM. But this time, one of them was directed at me.

"Natalie!" It was Willis.

I coughed as I tried to clear my airway of the debris. "Talon, I'm...still here. You might want to...swoop in now though. We're getting hit real fucking hard."

My husband breathed a small sigh of relief at the sound of my voice, though probably not my words. "We're trying to, Major. Listen. We'll get these Banshees off your backs ASAP. Just hold steady."

"Roger that. You be careful yourself up there, Captain."

"Yes, ma'am."

I opened up another private channel - to Willis's little brother this time - while the Banshees finally passed us up above after the second run. I wanted to make sure he was okay, too. "Matt? You all right, kiddo?"

"Yeah, Nat. I think so. That was some crazy shit, though."

"Wish I could tell you otherwise, but it'll only get tougher from here. Hope you're ready for it."

"I am," he replied firmly.

"Good. Then radio your brother to let him know you're okay and get back to it."

"Right."

Keeping each other updated on status wasn't something we were going to be able to do throughout the fight. But for now, in the brief moment between runs and just before the ground assault started again, I wanted to make sure we all got whatever peace of mind we could. Morale mattered a lot, and the three of us especially had been through hell both together and separately over the last few weeks. Now, it was finally time to try to turn things around.

"Marines, this is Major Cooper. I want the head companies on the move, now. The rebs on our flanks will back you up." I grit my teeth as I tightened my hold on my DMR; my chest was starting to throb again from all the excitement. "Our flyboys in the skies will deal with the Banshees. But that means we may have little to no air support on the ground for now. It's up to us to take back the forest and drive out the Storm. Is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Think we can do it?"

"Oorah!"

"Then let's get on it, Marines," I said with a renewed smirk. "Give 'em hell."

## 45. Chapter 44: Swept Underfoot

\*\*Chapter Forty-Four\*\*\*\*: \*\*\*\*Swept Underfoot\*\*

Firefights along the line between humans and the Storm began as small pockets of skirmishes before it all morphed into the full-fledged battle we'd been awaiting and planning for all along. I didn't have time to take everything in, as I was busy with my own struggle at the moment, but I could hear it. Machine guns were getting set up and opening up all along the lines - the Storm's too - as platoon leaders and company commanders shouted orders to their various units. Behind us, I heard the sharp cracks of sniper rifles, picking off what aliens they could between the trees as the enemy rushed up to take us. And to my flanks, teams of Marines as well as rebels used whatever weapons they had at their disposal to keep the oncoming tide of Remnant troops at bay.

It was already wild and chaotic in the forest, and things were only just beginning to get into full swing.

I quickly ducked my head as a plasma grenade came sailing in through the redwoods, waited for the explosive to detonate against the ground, spraying mud everywhere, and then I popped back up from behind cover. Bringing my DMR up fast, I set my sights instantly on the Grunt that had thrown it, shot him twice in the head, and moved on to the next target - a Jackal - just beside him.

Three more trigger bursts between the alien's orange shield took care of that, too. All around me now, though, the lines were getting more and more blended.

"Marines, take them out!" I shouted over the general COM channel then. "Snipers, target the bigger enemies first! Heavy weapons, you see a turret, clear the friendlies and fire! The rest of us and the rebs'll take care of what's left! Go!"

Because of my rank, I forced myself to stay slightly back while the Marines and rebels around me pushed up; if I fell there'd always be Hayden, but I didn't want to leave the entirety of the command burden to my best friend - and I wasn't exactly itching to be pushing flowers myself. Instead, while the chaos unfolded around me, I did my best to pick off enemies as I spotted them. I dropped two more Jackals and four Grunts with my DMR before the first of the Elites began coming through.

I watched three sniper shots quickly eliminate an equal number of the tall, formidable aliens as I took a moment to reload my weapon. Their violet blood came bursting out of the trio of sharp, precisely timed headshots through the holes in their helmets, taking out those hit by the rounds but spurring on the ones who weren't. Thankfully, we had plenty of manpower to go around for them as well, though - and that was all because of our last-minute alliance.

"Gunners, keep at it! We need to break their advance! Keep firing!"

It was Major Hayden's voice over the COM this time, issuing orders to everyone surrounding us. For my own part, while I reloaded, I

encouraged my aide to help out, too.

"Josh, you've got the bad boy in hand!" I yelled. "Take that SAW and let 'em have it! They're coming up right in front of us!"

"On it, Major!" the staff sergeant cried back.

Just as I finished ejecting my spent clip and slapped home a new one from the ammo pouch on my web belt, I heard Porter open up once more with his light machine gun. The small crowd of Elites, shielded Jackals, and eager Grunts moving forward fast through the trees all had their lives cut short by the sudden burst of bullets that came flying out of the SAW. The powerful, rapid-fire weapon made absolute mince meat out of the aliens' ground troops, ripping into bodies left and right, destroying shields in split seconds and punching through armor with a merciless frenzy. It was both awful and amazing to see at the same time.

For what felt like minutes - but really only amounted to several seconds - it seemed like the hail of lead was unstoppable. But I knew from experience that that wasn't the case; sooner or later, the clip was going to run out. So I took matters into my own hands and quickly slung my DMR behind my back, then pulled a frag from my belt.

"Marines, heads up! Frag out!" I shouted.

Throwing as hard as I could, the grenade went sailing into the bullet-filled air, landing almost miraculously at the bottom of a Jackal's translucent blue shield. The birdlike alien made a sound of surprise - something I was surprised I could even hear amid the cacophony of battle - and rolled away fast. Yet it wasn't quite fast enough.

The detonation sent more mud and wood shards bursting through the forest, making the Jackal's shield flare red and sputter out while tearing three Grunts apart from the shrapnel. An Elite beside them growled, but then was quickly torn to shreds himself as he warbled loud from Porter's SAW. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my aide rapidly train his sights to the now-defenseless Jackal that had survived the blast, but in the next heartbeat I'd already pulled the trigger myself. The thing dropped to the soaked earth with a wet smack, and that was that.

By the time that was over, it felt like a lot more had just happened. I was breathing hard and sweating inside my helmet, even though on the outside, I was drenched as could be from the relentless pounding of the rain. And my heart was beating fast - probably much faster than Doc Reynolds would've wanted it to, even with the meds. But he wasn't by my side now to scold me for it, and that was just as well. I had to keep fighting no matter what. There was no other way out of this now. And no way I wouldn't want to be here for my men.

Still breathing heavy, I clicked the COM. "All nearby units, report."

"Major Cooper, this is Captain Sam Garrison. Casualties are through the roof from the initial air assault, but we're holding them off on the ground. Gunners and snipers are working hard, ma'am."

"Captain Reese Kelson here, Major. We're fine. Only a few KIA so far, and we're doing our best to beat the Storm bastards back."

"Captain Shawn Harris, ma'am. Fighting hard and winning."

I smirked a little at that last one. "Very good, Shawn. Stay sharp, Marines, and keep up the great work."

Then another voice cut in. "Major Cooper, this is Giovanna Torri of the militia. We're on your left flank and could use some reinforcement."

"We're in a tight spot ourselves, Torri, but you'll get it," I answered. "First platoon, Charlie Company, 8th Engineers, you're up. Bring your heavy weapons and SAWs along. We need to hold the flanks or we're toast."

Acknowledgment lights winked green across my HUD, and I knew they were en route. Beside me, as I crouched giving commands, I saw more Marines and rebel units moving up since we'd just taken out the biggest group of oncoming aliens so far. That was good news. I took in a solid deep breath, willing my pulse to steady and easing the sudden pain, and then risked moving forward a bit myself. I tapped my aide on the shoulder.

"Porter, reload that thing at our next stop. We're going up, too."

The staff sergeant looked a little worried about that, but he nodded nonetheless. "Yes, ma'am. I've got your six."

For the first time since the fight for the forest had begun, it seemed that things were finally going our way - at least for now. However, I still hadn't heard anything from Willis yet, and that worried me. I could hear the battle in the sky up above still going on around us, but none of it was directed down here anymore. It sounded like both sides were holding their own - just like on the ground. But as long as things were tied, that still meant my husband was in danger.

Hang in there, Will, I thought to myself. Keep fighting tough, just like we are. And remember that the kids and I don't want to lose you. Be careful.

\* \* \*

><p>Somehow, the hours ticked by. Because of the unrelenting force of the weather - the deep blasts of thunder, the bright flashes of light, and the harsh pounding of the rain - it would've sounded like a full-fledged battle even if there hadn't been one going on. But in this case, it just added to the sounds of fighting going on throughout the forest, as well as up above. It was exhausting and grueling, dirty and wet and draining, but we kept going. Both sides kept going. Because neither of us had found a way to take the upper hand quite yet.</p>

By now, all of us were tired, soaked, hungry, muddy, and aching. For a unit this size, ammunition was getting burned up a thousand bullets at a time, so much that I'd dedicated an entire platoon to cracking open new crates of the stuff to our rear, and switching out units to

go ahead and go back for supplies. I knew it wouldn't last forever, and so did Hayden. But for now, we did our best, and hoped that our pilots in the air could shake off the Banshees sooner rather than later to provide with some overhead support - and maybe head back to the \_Affair\_ for more ammo, too, when we finally ran out.

Unlike earlier, though, and despite our gradually lowering energy levels, things were getting even more up close and personal now than before. In the falling rain and between the splintered and smoking remains of the trees around us, a handful of rebels and Marines fought hand-to-hand to bring down an Elite and its Grunt escort. Right beside me, another Marine down to his sidearm fired off five rapid rounds at the side of a Jackal's shield, finally getting past it and killing the alien bastard behind it. A third Marine ran at an obviously wounded Elite screaming at the top of his lungs, and ended the attack in a point-blank shotgun blast that sent the Storm troop warbling into the next dimension.

Then, somewhere to my left, a grenade detonated - a plasma one from the sounds of it. I heard and felt the explosion before I even noticed it'd been tossed. The resulting blast threw me onto my side in the mud with an "Oof!" and I saw stars for a second. It was my aide who shook me back to alertness.

"Major, it's not safe for you here!" he cried, crouched in front of me now. "Respectfully, I think it's time to move back!"

Even through the haze, I managed to shake my head emphatically. "No! Not now, Porter! We move forward or we hold our ground! It's the only way!"

"Not everyone, ma'am! Just you! For your safety!"

I grit my teeth against the pain, but at the same time was thankful for it because it kept me in the present. "That's a negative, Staff Sergeant. And my decision is final. We hold our ground with everyone else. Stay on it, Josh."

Porter let out a sigh. "Yes, ma'am!"

No sooner had he said the words than something new came bursting through what was left of the woods - quite literally. A huge green orb blasted straight into an already-splintered redwood trunk, leaving nothing but a small black crater in its wake. At first I wondered what the hell it was as I got back to my feet, clutching my DMR with white knuckles and trying to see past the rain. The second time a green ball of glowing plasma came through, though, I didn't think so much as sprint out of the way.

"Porter, watch it!"

The two of us threw ourselves back onto the muddy ground in an instant, each covering our heads as we always did out of instinct to avoid getting hit. For us, the motion had served us well, but others nearby weren't as lucky. As we got up a few seconds later, we saw the devastation that last cannon round had left behind. Unlike the first one, it had hit dead-on. Two Marines and two rebels were all killed instantly by the blast, and none were in one piece.

The wet, chunky earth was no longer just muddy with rainwater now,

but also awash in thick red blood.

My heart sank when I turned to look.

"Shit," was all I could bring myself to say. Then I faced my aide.  
"Staff, we've got to - "

"Natalie, you better be careful!" Hayden suddenly cut in through the COM. "They've got Hunters coming up through their ranks now!"

"\_Dammit\_,\_" I muttered. \_So that's where the rounds are coming from. Always something bigger and better showing up around here to make things more interesting,\_ I thought to myself. \_As if things weren't bad enough already.\_ I quickly licked my lips and keyed the COM again. "All units, this is Major Cooper! Be advised, we've got Hunter pairs engaged in the fight now! Steer clear and let the heavy weapons handle it! Snipers, if you've got a shot at their backs, take it!"

Going against my own orders, I took cover with Porter and then brought my DMR up again, wanting to do anything I could to help out the Marines and rebels trying to take down the Hunters - even if all I could do with my gun was provide a momentary distraction to give them a chance. I searched through the smoke and rain and debris and looked for the Hunter pair that was targeting our side of the woods, which was a little more difficult to do now that they'd just fired off another shot and weren't gearing up for a third right away. It took a few seconds, but then I spotted the hulking behemoths between the trees. I quickly zoomed in with my 3x scope and fired.

Turned out I got their attention all right...but not in the way I'd imagined. Just as a pair of rockets went streaking through the bombed-out forest, hitting another Hunter further out and sending a splatter of bright orange blood against the trees, the enormous aliens in our area got a fix on me and Porter. They were so quick to charge up the fuel rod cannons mounted to their massive arms that all I managed to say to my aide was, "Get - !"

I was unable to react as everything was enveloped in a flash of green. The ball of plasma burst half on the ground, half against a tree trunk right beside me, just scant feet away. I was instantly blown into the next closest tree, my helmet letting out a sickening \_crack\_ as it split where I'd dented it after my huge fight with Willis. After that, I didn't know what happened for a while, because I was down for the count.

When I came to a few minutes later, the scene had changed. The Hunters were gone, for one. The rain was still falling all around me, however, my uniform soggy and covered in mud - and, as I soon discovered, in some of my own blood as well as alien blood. I groaned for a moment against the soaked red earth, pain shooting through my wounded shoulder along with my head, and found that the force of the impact had caused me to bite my tongue. It also broke a vessel in my nose. I was bleeding from both at first, though it didn't seem to me like anything worse had occurred.

\_Just another day on the job,\_ I thought groggily.

As always, my aide was the first to rush to my side as the furious

battle continued all around us. I blinked up at him a couple times before I recognized his face, still a little dazed from getting bashed against a thick redwood from the cannon round.

"Major Cooper?" he asked, his face white. "Hang on, I'll get Doc."

"No, I'm...fine. Just...headache." I slowly brought a hand up to my now-exposed temple and winced. "I'll...need a new helmet for sure, though."

"Uh, right. Yes, ma'am. Maybe in the back with those ammo crates." He paused. "What about your face, Major?"

"From the...hit. Nothing...broken."

I heard him let out a sigh. "Okay. Do you need me to help you up, ma'am?"

"No. Just - "

Something instinctual made me glance up then, even as I struggled to push myself up off the ground. Blinking against the rain, the wet drops blending with the blood on my face, I watched as a familiar figure came into view. The way he held his battle rifle and swept his arms out at the troops around him assured me who he was, even in the ubiquitous uniform. It was my best friend, Major Oliver Hayden.

Without a helmet, I didn't have access to the COM to hear what he was saying to everyone. I wondered why he was here, too, so close to my own position - it was dangerous to have both of us in the same area. But I never got the answer to either of these questions. Because as soon as I got up, I screamed.

While he turned back for just a second to rally the Marines and rebels around him, I watched helplessly as my best friend was struck dead-on with a continuous, fast-as-lightning burst of plasma fire from a Storm rifle. It was the most terrifying sight I'd seen in nearly five years. And there was nothing I could do about it.

I didn't look to see where the hail of rounds were coming from. I remained transfixed on Hayden as his body bucked back harshly after getting hit, then fell hard onto the mud underfoot.

The plasma holes in his armor smoked in the rain as he lay on his back. Yet he stayed eerily still.

"\_Hayden!\_" I yelled out then. "No, no, no. Not again. Please, not again."

I thought of Dean Lewis, and how I'd already seen one of my very closest friends - someone who was like a brother to me - get killed by the Covenant before. Just because this time they were going by the name of the Storm didn't mean it felt any different. I was in shock and deep, deep anguish.

It was Porter who had to physically stop me from running out into the open to get to my friend.

"Major! Think about it!"

"But Oliver - "

"Doc's on it, ma'am. Look."

Sure enough, I saw Corpsman Michael Reynolds emerge from among the woods, too, and sprint for Hayden's position. When he got there, I tugged on Porter's uniform sleeve.

"Josh, move! You've got your SAW, so let's go!"

"Ma'am, it's highly inadvisable to - "

I gripped him hard enough for him to look at me. "He's like my brother, Staff," I said firmly. "We go."

Faced with an order like that, Staff Sergeant Porter had no choice but to cover me as we drew closer. My heart pounded hard inside my chest the entire time, pain coursing through me with every beat. I knew it was past time for me to have taken my medicine, and knew Doc would have to help me out soon as well. But right now, all I could think about was Oliver. I had to see if he was -

"Doc," I said, out of breath and dropping to my knees fast as soon as I got to where my best friend lay. "How is he? Come on, tell me he's fi - "

The look the medic gave me said it all. Even through the rain, I could see it. I could tell. Major Oliver Hayden had breathed his last when he'd taken those rounds to the chest and stomach. They dotted his torso armor, had scorched it in the most hideous of ways. They'd penetrated. And now, my best friend of nearly six years was no more.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Reynolds said to me then, his blue eyes dim with hurt. "I'm so sorry. I was too late for Lieutenant Lewis on the highway and I'm...I'm too late for Major Hayden now, too." He ran a quick hand over his short black hair. "Fuck, Cooper. He's dead."

Pain ripped into me first, but it was different than the kind I felt from my wounds - those I'd just received, and the ones I'd gotten earlier. It felt deeper, stronger, worse. So much fucking worse. I brought a hand up to my own hair at first, and after that, I just didn't know what to do anymore. What to say. I just kept looking down at Hayden.

I swallowed hard. "Are you sure, Doc? You know for sure that he's...that Oliver's...gone?" I wiped at the moisture forming in my eyes, independent of what fell from the sky. "I just...saw him moving. Breathing. Shouting orders. How could he - "

He looked me right in the eyes. "Yes, ma'am. Again, I'm very sorry. But the major's not with us anymore." He let out a sigh. "There's...nothing I can do, ma'am. He was dead before he even hit the ground. No way to resuscitate."

Slowly, I found myself nodding. It wasn't a conscious choice; more like a reflexive action. An acknowledgment that one of the best,

funniest, and most fun people I'd ever known was gone now, forever. And that this was the second time in my life that I'd had to witness one of my best friends get killed in combat.

I don't know how long I knelt there. I got lost for about a minute, shutting out all the other sounds and motions around me and focusing only on the mud and the feelings I felt and Hayden. I still didn't cry, though. It was only when my aide shook my good shoulder that I came back.

"Major? I know you can't hear this, but Captain Hawk has a report for you. About what's going on in the air."

Without meaning to, I snorted. "What's that? Is he dead, too?"

Staff Sergeant Porter frowned. "No, ma'am. He just wants to speak to you. Especially considering that now you're in charge on your own, I thought you should - "

"Give me your helmet," I replied brusquely.

"Right away, Major."

I wiped at my eyes again before putting on the helmet, a futile gesture considering the weather, and then I cleared my throat to speak. "Cooper here."

My husband immediately heard the change in my voice. "Nata - uh, Major? What's going on?"

"Hayden's dead."

There was complete silence on the other end. The words had come out more easily than I thought they would, almost flippantly. Even though that was very, very far from how I felt about it. I shut my eyes tight and released a sigh.

"Please, don't say anything now. Just...tell me the news."

I heard Willis swallow. "Right. We uh, we got the Banshees, Coop. They won't be a problem anymore."

"Unless they have some in reserve," I said wearily.

"Let's hope not. But in any case, you've got air support again, ma'am."

I almost snorted a second time. For all the good that does my best friend, I thought to myself. To Willis, I responded in a stiff tone, "Okay. That's good to know. I'll have my XO mark targets for you shortly. Is that all?"

"That's all, Cooper." His voice lowered then. "I'm sorry, honey. I really am."

"I know."

I cut the connection and handed the helmet back to my aide. He'd have to get me a new one soon, because I couldn't lead like this. But for now, the pain and the rain were enough.

A flash of light went through the trees, then a clap of thunder sounded up above. It added to the sudden heaviness I felt inside my chest, the hurt that was separate from the grave gunshot wound I'd received two weeks ago. Seemingly stuck in the mud, I wondered again why I wasn't crying yet, what was wrong with me, and how the fucking hell I was going to lead over three battalions' worth of troops back into battle on my own.

#### 46. Chapter 45: Broken Dynamic

\*\*Chapter Forty-Five: Broken Dynamic\*\*

\*\*\*\*0114 Hours, January 19, 2558. Near the City of Redwood Falls, Planet Khan. "The Mourning Period," Outer Colonies. Day Thirty of the New Age of Warfare\*\*\*\*

A few hours later, the rain had finally stopped. Even the sounds of thunder and the flashes of light had ceased; though the dark clouds remained overhead, promising more in the days to come. For the time being, at least, the weather didn't mirror my current disposition.

The destruction left behind did, though.

Before Willis and his squadron went on their last bombing run after taking care of the Banshees, the forest had already looked the worse for wear from all the fighting. Afterward, it was a complete mess. Most of the area had whole patches of trees that were simply gone - charred, blasted, or shot at until they'd been whittled down to nothing more than a smoking, splintered stump. The ground was still muddy and wet from the storm, and bodies littered nearly every nook and cranny in the place. There were dead Remnant troops, rebels, and Marines scattered throughout the woods - and plenty of still-drying, multicolored blood painting the earth. Only now, during this brief lull in the battle, were we all able to really take it in.

I almost wished we couldn't. I almost wished we were still in the midst of the fighting. Because then, I wouldn't have time to think, or feel, or even look around. I'd be going off instinct and adrenaline, and using up all my emotions in an aggressive assault against the enemy. Instead, now I stood in front of half of a tree and tried not to let the hurt engulf me.

Doc had already given me my next shot for my heart, so it wasn't a physical pain this time. It was the kind of pain I'd already felt way too damn many times in my life, mostly in the years I'd spent in the Corps: the numbing loss of a great friend or family member. I'd had more than my fair share of both over the last decade. Coupling it all with my newfound heavy burden of command only made it worse.

I wanted to slowly slump down to the ground and just take a break for a while. Quit. Maybe finally shed a tear or two for my best buddy. But I couldn't. I had way too many men and women counting on me now, looking solely to me for orders on what to do next. Truth was, I only had a few things to tell everyone for the moment, and it was always the same during any small respite in a battle. Resupply, eat, sleep, prepare. And remain vigilant. It was all I could offer right now.

Eventually, I shook my head to myself as I stood there in a filthy uniform that was only just starting to dry and stared straight ahead out into the woods - or what remained of them. Without meaning to, I found myself quietly saying the words aloud to a dead Hayden, my hands curled loosely around my gun.

"So this is it, huh? You survived all that shit in Austria, the Flood, getting sniped in the head in Buenos Aires, New Mombasa, Voi, all of it, just to die here? You made it through the whole damn \_war\_ for \_this\_? Fuck, Oliver."

Sniffling, I quickly wiped at my nose with my sleeve, successfully removing some of the dried blood still there from when I hit the tree. I wasn't just sad because my friend had died. It made me even more depressed to think of how his family was going to react at the news, too. We'd been best friends for several years now, so I knew his wife well. I knew his three kids, too - just like he did mine. And now, after everything we'd been through, he was gone. Just like that.

I was still trying to somehow wrap my head around it all when I heard a sudden rustle through the foliage nearby. As I was close to the edge of the perimeter now - probably closer than I should've been - I tensed and brought my gun up in an instant, ready to fire at whatever it was if it turned out to be anything but friendly. I only lowered my DMR when a familiar figure emerged with his hands up.

"Whoa, Coop!" Willis said then. "It's me."

Seeing my husband here on the ground in his flightsuit made me raise an eyebrow at him. I slung my rifle behind my back and huffed.  
"Willis, what are you doing here?"

"Thought it was obvious. Checking up on you and my little brother while I can."

"You shouldn't be down here. More Banshees could show up any minute, and we can't take them out on our own."

He flashed me a sad smile. "Then I'll be back in the skies in less time than that. Come on. Let's talk."

I brought a hand up to my temple. "Will..."

"You must need it after that, Cooper. And I know you can't just unload on anybody."

"It's not that simple. I can't just ask you to stop what you're doing to come hold my hand when something like this happens, either. I'll..." I swallowed hard on the sudden lump in my throat, willing it away. "I'll figure it out."

He looked me in the eyes. "Natalie - "

"I mean it, Will. I won't talk about this now. Get back up top." I gestured vaguely to the troops around us. "We're burning through ammo fast. Why don't you make yourself useful and bring down more crates from the \_Affair\_? Refuel your Broadswords while you're at it, too. And if there's anything else you can think of, now's the time. We

might not get another chance later."

"Is that an order, \_Major\_?"

Rather than flirtatious, this time when he used my rank, he sounded edgy. Frustrated with my husband's attitude and the situation, I responded in kind.

"Yes, Captain. \_Go\_."

Willis scoffed and shook his head at me as he turned to leave.  
"Right. Sorry for trying to help."

Despite my words, the pain inside me only increased in magnitude as he walked away. Just when I thought he was about to disappear back into the trees, however, Willis faced me again. His expression was harder to read now, something between worry and confusion. He let out a deep sigh before speaking.

"What are you going to do about everything if this baby - "

"I don't know," I answered curtly. "But like it or not, the buck stops here now. This is up to me, for as long as I can." Releasing a tired sigh of my own, I added, "And after that, we'll see."

\* \* \*

><p>Shortly after my not-so-pleasant conversation with Willis, my aide came back around on his quick patrol of the perimeter. I knew it was something I should've done with him, just to get a sense of where everyone was at, but I just didn't have the energy for it. I hadn't had my shot yet when the staff sergeant had taken off with his squad, and I'd just watched one of my best friends die right in front of me - for the second time. If ever there was a moment where I would've allowed a subordinate to lighten the load for me a bit, that was it. Everyone needed a little boost sometimes, and I was no exception.</p>

Now that I was able to, however, I'd resumed my duties - and part of that was checking in with Porter on what he'd seen while he'd made the rounds.

"Staff," I said to him as he approached.

The seasoned yet still fairly young noncom nodded back. "Ma'am." He waited until he got closer to continue. "Well, lines are quiet for now, Major. I guess that last bombardment really did those alien bastards in. Looks like they've retreated for now."

I couldn't help but snort. "I wonder how long that'll last. If anything, they've gone into hiding just to come back out full force...and we had a hard enough time trying to keep them at bay the first time."

"Yes, ma'am. But it could also be that the opposite's true. Maybe they've headed back to the island."

I shook my head as I folded my arms across my chest, then stared down at my mud-caked boots. "No. They wouldn't've gone to the trouble to branch out this far with this many troops just to ditch it after one

tough fight. I know this isn't over yet." I glanced up at him again. "Anything else, Josh? How's morale?"

Staff Sergeant Porter shrugged. "All right, Major, considering. Better now that the rain's stopped. I think everyone will feel a little safer once we get new supplies in, though."

"I've got the pilots already on it. We should get some fresh gear down from the Affair within the hour."

"That'll be nice to have, ma'am." The staff sergeant paused then to pull something from his pack. "Speaking of which, I nabbed you another helmet when I passed by what's left of the supply crates to the rear. Hope it fits."

Porter held it out to me and I took it, raising the faceplate as I slipped it on over my head so I could still talk to him face-to-face.

"Thanks, Staff. This'll make things a lot easier on me."

"No problem, Major."

It was while I was flicking on the electronic suite inside the thing that I got a sudden hail from one of Kilo Squadron's pilots - but it wasn't anyone that was currently with Willis. Instead, the name that flashed in green across my heads-up display was CAPT HEAT.

"Major Cooper," my husband's best friend said over the COM channel. "I heard a lot's been going on around here since we left yesterday. I'm sorry about Major Hayden, ma'am."

For what seemed like the millionth time in the past few hours, I had to swallow the pain down in order to speak. "Yeah. Thanks, Heat. So what's the skinny?"

"Well, I'm just bringing our spook back now from Qamar. He's got some stuff to impart to you, I'm sure, but of course he won't tell me anything."

Under other circumstances, his cheery tone of voice would've made me form a smile, too. "Command privilege, Captain."

"Right." I could hear the smirk in his voice. "Or is it 'command nightmare', ma'am?"

"Can be at times, but you make the most of it. What's your ETA?"

"Four minutes, Major."

"Good. Then send Lieutenant Lloyd on over once you've landed. And after that, I want you to rejoin Kilo. They could use your help getting us some extra stuff off the boat."

"Will do, ma'am."

"Okay. Cooper out."

As soon as the connection cut I found myself growing more and more

anxious, yet relieved that there was finally something other than my best friend's death to think about. Something to do, something I could focus my energy on now during the lull.

I hoped that whatever news the spook brought back to us would be good. I could use a glimmer of hope right now. And I knew a lot of the Marines could, too.

\* \* \*

><p>Navy Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd arrived right on cue and not a moment too soon. I turned the instant I heard a second rustle through the trees, bringing my DMR to bear again just in case, then quickly lowered it once more when I saw a battle rifle trained on me. Lloyd did the same when he recognized me.</p>

In lieu of a salute, he gave me a small nod of acknowledgment.  
"Major."

"Cal," I said in return, then got straight to the point. "So what did you find?"

Much to my dismay, the spook frowned. "I was hoping the intel-gathering would be more lucrative, ma'am, to be honest. Just like I'm sure you did. From what I could tell, though, most of the Remnant troops are still clustered around those damn ruins they found. And I wasn't in a position to take a closer look without getting caught." He finally let out a sigh. "I'm sorry, Major."

It took a moment for the information - or lack thereof - to sink in. "What about enemy strength, Lieutenant? If they've got another force this big on the island, I'm not sure we can - "

A ghost of a smile appeared on his lips. "Well, that's one thing you can rest easy about, ma'am. Looks like they've got the overwhelming majority of their troops here on the mainland now. What's left behind is really nothing more than a rear guard. I'm still not sure why they chose to deploy that way, considering how important the ruins seem to be to them, but that's what's going on right now. They've decided to take their chances and brought out the big guns for the fight here, but left things pretty weakly defended over there. There's only maybe a company's worth of Storm troops remaining on Qamar."

"Finally a silver lining, huh?" I said. "That means if we beat them here, we've got them beat over there as well. Taking back the island and finding out what the hell's really happening shouldn't be too hard at that point."

"Correct, Major."

"But we still don't know how they amassed this many troops right under our noses in the first place." It was my turn to frown now. "How do we know that's not going to happen again while we're busy fighting here?"

"We don't, ma'am. But something tells me that if they'd wanted more of a heavy presence around their sacred spot of land, they would've upped their numbers by now. Maybe they can't. Maybe this is their limit, and now they've got to make due with whoever's here."

"That'd be a relief," I muttered. "Because we've got to do the same thing."

Neither of us said anything for a while after that. There wasn't really much to reply to. It was only when I was about to give the spook orders to carry on that he suddenly spoke again, almost hesitantly.

"In any case, ma'am, now that Major Hayden's gone, the decision of what to do about the Storm - and the island - is yours. However you want to go about this, just let us know and we'll do it."

The look of earnest he gave me made it clear to me that whatever he'd seen on Qamar - however incomplete the picture was - had scared him. At least on some level. Hell, the fact that our main enemy was able to spawn troops at a frenetic pace without us knowing how had me anxious, too. But the current small number of forces on the island gave me hope, and made me certain that the path we were going down now was the right one. Save the city and the planet first, then moving on to the Remnant-occupied island once that was complete.

"We stay the course for now, Lieutenant," I said firmly to the spook then. "We break the Storm's lines here, make sure no civilians are injured or killed or displaced, and then we get those alien bastards right where it hurts. Their precious fucking island."

#### 47. Chapter 46: Our Time

\*\*Chapter Forty-Six: Our Time\*\*

\*\*\*\*0736 Hours, January 30, 2558. Near the City of Redwood Falls, Planet Khan. "The Final Straw," Outer Colonies. Day Forty-One of the New Age of Warfare\*\*\*\*

"This has happened to you before, hasn't it?"

The past week and a half of combat hadn't done much to alter my mood since Hayden had been killed. If anything, it had thrust me further into absolute numbness emotionally, though I still had no trouble keeping tabs on and issuing orders to everyone under my command. I'd been doing it long enough that once I was forced into the position of taking charge of so many people at once, I'd found that it wasn't actually as daunting as I'd first thought. Once you had experience running a whole battalion, directing a couple more on top of that simply felt like the next natural evolution. It was still a lot to take in, as I only had a year as a major under my belt so far, but oftentimes you had no choice but to rise to the occasion. And thankfully, that was something I'd done many times before in my career.

But I still couldn't shake the feeling of empty bitterness at the loss of my best friend.

As I sat with my back up against a depleted ammo crate in the wet woods, knees spread out but close to my chest with my DMR in my lap, a light sprinkling of rain continued to fall around us, keeping our battledress uniforms - and the mud beneath our boots - forever soggy. I lifted my faceplate for a moment to pinch the bridge of my nose. I wasn't quite sure I wanted to respond to that particular question,

but I found myself answering anyway.

"Yeah." Staring straight ahead now, I released an exhausted sigh.  
"More times than I can count, Lieutenant. And more times than I care to remember."

Beside me, Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd looked only marginally better than I did. Twelve days of near-constant fighting in the moist conditions of the forest had taken its toll on everyone, even the spook. We were all tired, dirty, hungry, sleep-deprived, aching, and bloodied - sometimes from the aliens we took out, sometimes from our own wounds. If I hadn't still been mourning Oliver's death, the number one items on my wish list at present would be a shower, a hot meal, and a comfortable place to sleep indoors. Since none of that was currently possible, however, I was starting to seriously consider the option of handing out stims to my troops. But we still had some fight left in us yet, so until we got to that point, I waited.

"When I told you about my mom a while back, you said you'd lost both your parents during the war, ma'am," Lloyd said quietly. "What happened?"

I snorted to myself. Other than giving out orders, I hadn't spoken much to Willis since the day he'd landed in the woods after Hayden died. And now, for some reason it seemed like the floodgates were suddenly opening. I couldn't stop myself from spewing out the words. I guess my subconscious decided it was finally time to begin trying to heal from everything that had occurred in the last few weeks.

"Where do I start?" I asked. "My dad died a long time ago. He was killed by the Covenant when I was four. My mom didn't pass until years later, closer to the end of the conflict. Right at the end of the war."

The spook took in a breath. "If you don't mind my asking, ma'am, how did they - "

"How'd they die? My dad was in the Navy and got his ship blown out of existence one day by those alien bastards. My mom was a civilian scientist. She didn't make it out of the bombing of St. Louis." I had to quickly cover up the slight quiver in my voice, old emotions resurfacing. "My oldest son was almost killed in the same bombing. We were lucky he came out of it with only a few scratches and a broken arm. He wasn't even three years old yet at the time. I was posted with my unit in South America and hated that I couldn't be there to protect him."

"Shit, Major. I'm sorry."

I heaved another sigh. "It's okay. Thankfully he was fine, like I said. And my husband managed to be there for our son when I wasn't. But it still scared the living shit out of me. I was upset about losing my mom of course, but I just couldn't take the thought of my little boy - "

"I understand. I think my mom must've felt that too when the Covenant attacked our home planet and she tried so hard to get us out." A sad smile formed on his face. "I'm glad she did, otherwise I wouldn't be here now."

"Who's 'us', LT?"

"Me and my older sister." He glanced down at his battle rifle then, propped up against him in the dirt. "I don't have occasion to tell this to a lot of people, ma'am, but I'm originally from Derranjak, in the Outer Colonies. Can't say I grew up there, but that's where I was born. And it's where my mom died on Christmas, trying to get us off-planet."

I nodded. "I'd do the same for my kids. In a heartbeat. There's never any questions asked when it comes to your children." I turned to look at him. He wasn't too much younger than me, just a few years. "Do you have kids, Cal?"

For a moment he seemed embarrassed. "No, ma'am. No kids, not married. Not even a niece or a nephew. My sister's married but she doesn't have kids yet. I don't know if she plans to. She's in charge of an ODST battalion in the Inner Colonies, so I know that keeps her plenty busy." Then he sobered. "But I know because of what our mom did for us how fierce that love must be."

"You said you became a spook because of her, didn't you? How'd you get your gold stripes?"

"Naval Academy on Reach, ma'am. Class of 2550. Barely squeaked in there near the end of the war." He snorted. "I was afraid it'd all be over before I'd get to see any action. That was my mistake. I saw damn plenty in those last three years of it, and by the end I was glad to see it done."

"Yeah. All of us were." I shifted my rifle in my lap as more water drizzled down from the sky. I could sense another thunderstorm looming. "2550, huh? I graduated from there in 2547. Sounds like we missed each other by a couple years."

Lloyd suddenly smiled. "That's a shame, Major. You've been through a lot, but you don't show it. That speaks to your character."

I had to consciously stop myself from letting out a snort. "I wish that were all of it, LT. There's more to the story than that, but that'll be for another time."

"Same here, ma'am."

Curiosity got the better of me with his statement. As I stood, I turned to look at him again. "You probably already knew all this about me, didn't you? From your ONI files?"

This time, the spook looked a little sheepish. "Yes, ma'am, although not some of the more personal details. In my line of work, I've found that it's more insightful to get things straight from the horse's mouth rather than just a few notes and dates on a person's CSV. People tend to say a little more and pad it with their emotions. Overall, it's a better way to learn about someone." He met my gaze with his clear blue eyes. "And I make it a point to get to know all my superior officers, Major. You don't always get the best and brightest."

I folded my arms across my chest. "Yeah? And what's your verdict on

me?"

"No worries, ma'am," he said with a grin. "You definitely rank among the top."

\* \* \*

><p>The light rain continued to fall as the Remnant finally resumed pressing their advance. Over the last few days, instead of being on the offensive as I liked to be, both the Marines and rebels had been forced to defend our position, and make sure the aliens didn't penetrate our lines. The good news, though, was that my wounds were steadily healing now. I only had to take the shot once a day instead of two, my wounded shoulder was feeling much better, and so I was no longer as encumbered. Doc Reynolds said that in another week or two, I should be pretty much good to go. Which was nice, considering all that I had to take care of at the moment.</p>

"Ma'am? It's Captain Harris. We've got some activity picking up again on our right flank. Request orders, Major."

"Same as always, Shawn," I replied over the COM. "Hold them off. Use whatever you have at your disposal. Save the heavy weapons and sniper shots for the tough jobs and if you need backup, fire off a message to the rebs. They've got a couple of platoons reinforcing the lines there. Let them pull their weight, too."

"Got it, ma'am." There was something that sounded like a sigh on the other end. "We've got a problem though, Major. Ammo's almost all gone. We've been burning through MG belts like crazy especially lately. We could use some resupply."

"That'll take a few minutes to coordinate, Captain. Think you can hold out that long?"

"I don't know, ma'am. We're getting hit hard and fast. I just -"

"Standby."

I quickly switched channels and brought my gun down off my shoulder. If my XO's side of the lines were getting charged, there was a good chance the Storm were rearing up for another go. "Colonel Laraza? This is Major Cooper. I've got something I'm hoping your men could help me out with."

Though I was loathe to speak to the man who'd nearly gotten me killed, I didn't have much of a choice now - and he'd proven himself a useful ally in the last couple weeks. Without the insurgents' aid, I wasn't sure any of us would've lasted this long. Separately we would've easily been defeated, but together, we still had a chance.

"Yes, Cooper. Go ahead. What is your desire?"

"Firepower. Gather up a couple squads of your finest and send them to these coordinates, on our right flank. My Marines are hanging tough for now, but they'll need the extra numbers. We're running low on ammunition, and resupply might take a minute longer than they've got. If you want to keep Khan, I recommend you do it now."

The voice on the other end didn't seem pleased by the command, but Laraza acquiesced. "Very well, Major. You shall have it."

"Good. Cooper out."

I was just about to switch channels again when a beam rifle shot came pulsing out of the woods. It hit what was left of the tree just off to the side of me, etching a deep smoking hole into the bark, and I rapidly ducked out of instinct. Not that that would've helped me much if the round had been dead-on, but old habits died hard - especially when you'd only recently been shot yourself. As soon as it was past, I found myself some cover and spoke.

"Marines, get down! We've got an active sniper targeting the center of our lines! And all units, be advised! Storm troops coming up on the right flank! Watch it!" To the men and women closest to me, I turned around and said, "Sharpshooters, you're up! Get me a tag on that Jackal and take him out!"

"Yes, ma'am!" came the chorused reply.

A number of Marines took cover then per my order, while the handful of snipers remaining found inconspicuous perches to fire from. But as I watched, I saw that it wasn't one of my own men that got into position first. It was a reb. The woman got down on one knee and squeezed off the initial shot before anyone else had a lead, and I saw that the blip representing the enemy fighter immediately went dark on my tactical feed. I couldn't help but briefly grin.

"Nice work!" I said over the COM. "Now keep a sharp eye on any more of those bastards that might be in the area. The rest of you, let's move!"

Around me, a large group of Marines and insurgents advanced forward in tandem. I followed cautiously behind them, acutely aware of the fact that if I bit the big one now, there'd be no one left but captains to coordinate the assault - and that would be very bad. As much as I wanted to help, I knew I needed to be extra careful as well, so I tried my best to keep things on an even keel.

This time when I keyed the radio, I was finally able to get a hold of who I'd been wanting to talk to earlier.

"Talon, we've got ourselves a situation down here."

There was an anxiety-inducing moment of static, then, "Read you loud and clear, Major. What can I do for you, ma'am?"

"Got anymore leftovers from your trip to the Affair? We're running low on our right flank and could use a boost." I gripped my DMR tighter in my hands, searching between the trees for more movement. "Looks like the Remnant's back at it, and I'm ready to finish this if we can."

"Yes, ma'am, I do," Willis replied. "Tell everyone groundsides to watch the skies. I'll drop some canisters for them shortly. ETA is twenty seconds."

"Right. Thanks."

"No problem, Major. Heads up!"

I didn't feel as worried as I had in the past when I heard a sudden whoosh go through the air. I knew it was Willis and his pilots covering our ass. Just before the drop, I hailed my second-in-command again.

"Harris, you've got incoming!" I shouted. "Friendly this time! You're getting your ammo, and then I want those alien sons o' bitches gone!"

Much to my surprise, the captain actually laughed. "Roger that, ma'am! I got this."

We all felt the wave of heat and the roar of the engines as the squadron of Broadswords flew past us overhead. The Marines in front of me even halted their advance momentarily till they passed. Then I began to hear the thunk thunk thunk of multiple ammo canisters hitting the soggy earth near our right flank.

"Woo!" Harris yelled over the COM then. "Now this is gonna be a fight! Let's go, Marines!"

Slowly, despite everything that had happened lately, I finally felt like things were going in the right direction. I even found myself smiling slightly beneath my helmet. "You heard the man! All units, open fire!"

Once again, Marines and rebels united to push forward against the Storm, but that didn't mean the ex-Covies just sat back and took it. Another hard-earned battle was imminent.

In seconds, the aliens started moving up too, and there was a sudden flurry of activity as plasma weaponry opened up to counter our own. Grenades started sailing through the trees on both sides, and I suddenly had to press my back hard against my cover when a hail of needler rounds were unleashed my way. I heard a few shatter on the log I was behind, making my heart pound hard in my chest. But then I listened to someone beside me scream as the next set pierced his clothes and then exploded inside him, and my blood ran cold.

The second burst of needles had gone straight into a young corporal's body, bursting near his upper chest and throat where his torso armor didn't quite reach. Even at first glance the wound was ghastly, but I was the only one close enough to do anything about it. So I quickly scrambled over, trying to keep my head down amongst the plasma and needle-filled woods, crawling fast in the mud to get to him.

"Corporal, hang on!" I cried.

Though it was beyond dirty from days spent fighting in the forest, it was the last resort for the young Marine dying in front of me. If I did nothing, he'd be dead before Doc even had a chance to get here. So I crouched beside him, strained my muscles and grit my teeth as I dragged him behind cover, then jerked my combat knife out of its sheath and began cutting off the sleeve of my uniform jacket. When I was done, I pressed one hand to his chest below the wound while I placed the fabric over it with the other. Yet still, a huge amount of

blood seeped through with every beat of his heart.

He stared up at me with wide brown eyes, imploring me to save him. Then his gaze slowly began to lose its light.

"Marine, look at me! Stay focused!"

For a second, it looked like he wanted to say something in reply, but blood bubbled up in his mouth and quickly spilled out, preventing him from speaking. I rolled him onto his side so he wouldn't choke and pressed down harder on the torn sleeve of my jacket, trying hard to keep his blood inside him rather than out. The motion briefly stemmed the rapid flow of the fluid, but it was soaking through too fast. We needed Reynolds.

With my free hand, I keyed the COM again. "Medic! Get up here now! You need to - !"

My words were drowned out by the sudden streak of a rocket leaving the tube just meters up ahead. I wondered why the hell the heavy weapons had already activated, and then I realized - there must've been Hunters coming forward now. I tried not to let the thought agitate me and instead kept my expression neutral as I worked on the wounded Marine. When it seemed like he was about to pass out, his face terribly pale from blood loss, I used my free hand to slap the side of his cheek - just enough to sting a little to keep him awake.

"Hey! Don't you give up!"

I'd had too many die on me this way over the years. I didn't want another to lose his life in my arms. I was determined to save this one...especially since I hadn't been able to save my best friend.

Finally, just after I'd used my knife a second time to rip off my other sleeve to replace the blood-soaked one, I saw Doc Reynolds emerge from the trees. He came bounding over through the plasma fire and crouched just on the other side of me. I kept a firm hold on my sleeve against the corporal's wound until Reynolds held a heftier piece of gauze in his hands and gestured for me to lift it.

While he pulled out a canister of biofoam, I watched as the medic stabbed the young Marine with the coagulant and I sat back on my haunches, realizing only now just how hard I was breathing. It was only when Reynolds slapped the gauze pad over the wound that I glanced up at him, tossing the bloody rags of my uniform sleeves on the ground now that they were no longer needed.

The cold sprinkle of rain bit into my bare arms now, moistening the short T-shirt sleeves beneath my jacket and making goosebumps appear on my skin, but I hardly noticed.

"Well? Is he going to make it?" I asked.

True to his nature, Reynolds sighed. "I don't know, Major. We tried. The rest is up to him." He gestured to my bloody hands. "Thanks for doing that. If he has any shot at all, it's because you reacted so fast to help. I wouldn't've gotten here in time."

Still trying to catch my breath, I replied, "I did what I thought was needed. What I could."

The medic flashed me a grim smile. "And that's why I'm glad to still be serving with you, ma'am. I'll take it from here."

"Right," I said. "Give me an update on him as soon as you know."

"I will, Major."

Picking up my DMR from the mud, I turned back in the direction of the fight and keyed the COM. "All units, this is Major Cooper. Status, now. I want to know what's going on on the flanks, and what the hell is happening with those Hunters. Are they down yet?"

"Major, this is Captain Kelson! We're just a couple hundred meters up from your position, ma'am, and we've got plenty of Remnant troops to go around! Hunters are out of commission for now, though. But we could still use a hand!"

"Ma'am, this is Harris! That supply drop did wonders for us. The MGs on the right flank and the addition of the rebs are allowing us to hold our own here now. I'm happy to report that we're whittling down the last of the alien bastards on this side."

"Major Cooper, this is Captain Warfield! Left flank is secure, ma'am. Awaiting orders."

I nodded. "You'll get 'em, Captain. Harris, keep those lines solid and make sure nothing breaks through. Keep hacking at it. Kelson, you'll get some help holding the Storm off shortly. Warfield, have A Company of Hayden's battalion move in to relieve you and start advancing on Kelson's flank. I want you help bolster the center line. Because if we get caught undermanned there, we're cooked. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am!" the captains answered.

"Good. Semper fi, Marines. Let's finish this."

"Oorah!"

As soon as that was complete, I switched channels again while the fight continued around me. "Talon, this is Cooper. I've got one more task for you if you're up for it."

"Say the word, ma'am. We're coming back around now."

"Great. We're having some trouble at twelve o'clock. Think you can clear the way for us?"

Though I knew he was weary from the fighting as well, I heard the grin in my husband's voice when he replied. "Yes, ma'am. Consider it done. We'll be coming in hot in thirty, and then we'll go for one more pass till we're out of ordnance."

"Acknowledged. Give 'em hell, Talon." To Kelson, I said, "Captain, friendly air support incoming. Keep your heads down and get ready to mop up what's left. Kilo's agreed to two runs so just sit tight for a minute."

"Got it, Major."

Since I was already out of the blast zone, I didn't trouble myself too much with keeping my own head down. Instead, as the Broadswords roared loud up above, I sprang out of cover then and fixed my sights on the first Storm troop I saw - an Elite. I rattled off four bursts until its shield shimmered out and my bullets found purchase deep in its throat. The formidable alien sputtered as purple blood came gushing out, and I thought it was rather fitting considering what its brethren had just done to one of my Marines.

\_Yeah, that's right, you son of a bitch,\_ I thought bitterly to myself. \_Choke on it, fucker. For what you did to me, and to Hayden, and to that corporal, and what you almost did to Willis near the outpost. Just fucking give up already.\_

Once the alien was down, I quickly ran to the side behind the nearest cover and squeezed off a rapid succession of bursts, bringing down a Jackal that had lost its shield and the four Grunts beside it. A fifth came rushing out of the trees then, determined to stop me with a flurry of plasma pistol fire, but I was just as determined to see it end. I ducked behind a large chunk of tree as the rounds came in, then popped back up and fired straight and true - right into the little bastard's head, killing him instantly. Then my clip was spent.

But that was fine by me. Because that was the same moment that my husband and his pilots dropped their heavy payload right on the Storm's heads.

I watched as there was a sudden huge explosion right in front of us but slightly to the side, then another a split-second later closer to the middle, then another next to that, then another further up. When all was said and done, eight missiles had dropped. And that wasn't even counting the constant rattle of F-41s' autocannons. The combined fire resulted in a devastating hit that I knew in my gut had just relieved us ground troops of a lot of tedious hard work - and got us one step closer to eliminating the threat of the Remnant on the mainland altogether.

We were so close to victory now I could taste it. It was gratifying to feel after all we'd been through to get here. But I also knew that it wasn't quite over just yet. I waited anxiously for Willis to report in.

"\_Woo!\_" he shouted loud over the COM. "Direct hit, Major! You're welcome!"

A small grin formed on my face then. "Fantastic job, Talon. One more should do them in."

"Maybe not completely, ma'am, but there won't be much left to finish off at that point. Standby. Pass two coming in twenty."

"Roger that!"

It ended up being less than that before we all heard the hypersonic rush of the Broadswords again. And this time, we all had the feeling that this was going to be it. The final blow. The straw that broke

the camel's back. The emotion was nearly exhilarating.

But in my heart, I also knew that even this wasn't the end. After this, there would still be the Remnant troops on Qamar Island to deal with. And even if there weren't that many there, I knew I could bet my ass that they'd fight hard to protect whatever it was they were harboring - and we'd be without the insurgents' aid and numbers this time. And I still wasn't sure if they'd managed to bring in more warriors or not while things had been going on over here.

Yet still, once that second pass was done, the positive reports I was getting from all the company commanders on the ground were more than encouraging. Now, all that was left to us here in the forest was mop-up duty.

Then, we'd face the last of the aliens on Qamar.

A lump formed in my throat, however. Despite the win, the loss had been great.

The physical devastation in the forest only mirrored what I felt like on the inside. Because I knew that no matter what I did now, Major Oliver Hayden would always be gone.

So I was determined to finish off the rest of our mission here on Khan for him.

#### 48. Chapter 47: Dire Straights Overcome

\*\*Chapter Forty-Seven: Dire Straights Overcome\*\*

\*\*\*\*\*1003 Hours, February 7, 2558. Near the City of Redwood Falls, Planet Khan. "The Short Respite," Outer Colonies. Day Forty-Nine of the New Age of Warfare\*\*\*\*\*

Though the large-scale battle had ended a little over a week ago, mop up duty had taken longer than previously thought. Small pockets of Storm troops continued to harass our lines on occasion, and it took some time to snuff them all out - in particular the Jackal sharpshooters. So by February, instead of being on Qamar Island already, we stayed until the job was definitively finished.

Presently, I stood leaning against one of the many half blown-up trees throughout the forest, surrounded by two squads of exhausted and dozing Marines from my engineer battalion. Some used their packs as pillows, other their jackets, still others their weapons - or their battle buddy's shoulder. A few were tearing through energy bars and MREs, or downing gulps of water from their canteens as they sat in their filthy and bloodied uniforms. In the meantime, the light drizzle of rain from the sky continued to fall around us.

With my DMR slung behind my back, I felt just as tired as everyone else - and probably hungrier, since I hadn't allowed myself much of a break in the past few weeks; not even to eat. I was going to be real glad when it was all truly over.

But first, there was still some work to do.

"Major? It's Captain Harris. I think we've found the last remaining group of the Remnant, ma'am."

I quickly eased myself off the tree and pulled my rifle back into my hands, keeping the barrel pointed low in the presence of friendlies.

"What's your position, Shawn?"

"We're about two hundred meters ahead of you, ma'am. We could use some backup."

"You'll have it, Captain. Standby."

Walking the few paces separating us, I stood in front of the two spent squads of men and women and shouted, "Marines, gear up! We've got one last pocket of aliens to wipe off the map before we can get our beauty sleep. Lock and load, everyone, and let's move!"

There was a small chorus of groans as the Marines were forced to wake up and get back at it, but I felt better knowing that once this excursion was complete, they'd all get the brief respite they needed. For my part, I checked the load on my own gun and then proceeded to take point. It was ill-advised for me to go along, and I knew it, but I was loathe to send my Marines off to a fight and not be a part of it myself. Especially considering that this was going to be the final send-off edition for the Storm.

We arrived at my XO's position with seconds to spare and a fierce firefight already in full swing. While my Marines moved up to aid in the skirmish, I dropped back behind cover then and brought my DMR up, searching for targets through the scope to watch their six. When I spotted the first few aliens of the bunch, I keyed the COM.

"Heads up, Marines! There's three Elites in this bunch so be careful on approach."

I waited for the acknowledgment lights to wink green across my HUD, and then I joined the fray myself, opening up with my mid-range rifle. I'd managed to get the attention of one of the tall alien bastards when one of the Marines ahead of me tossed a frag in their direction, eliminating a handful of Storm troops at the head of the group. The shrapnel rapidly tore into three Grunt bodies and sent a shielded Jackal rolling to the side, only to get hit by a hail of lead from Harris's men. Fresh Remnant blood splattered against the mud and the trees, and I smirked inside my helmet.

"Excellent work. Keep at it!"

The small unit of ex-Covies was outnumbered and surrounded now, and they knew it. I figured that's why the last Elite growled loud after I took out its brother while another Marine sprayed fire at the second, already wounded, and killed him in less than half a minute. Enraged, the final Elite charged all of us then, followed closely by the remaining handful of Grunts. Each fired off quick bursts with their plasma weapons, hitting one of the Marines - and then it was our turn to get aggressive.

I stood slightly taller from my cover and yelled, "Marines, let 'em have it!"

A furious storm of bullets filled the air between the trees with a

cacophony more intense than any I'd heard in a long time - and the last few Remnant troops had no choice but to attempt to wade through it to press their advance.

Needless to say, they didn't make it very far. There were simply too many of us, and too few of them. Within minutes, the skirmish was over. And what was left behind were several bloodied alien bodies to our single Marine loss.

I didn't realize I'd been holding my breath in that final minute until I heaved a sigh of relief at the end. It was done now, for real. The battle for the forest, the city, and mainland Khan was over.

As a medic tended to the fallen Marine, the rest of the group glanced once at the dead ex-Covies, then looked to me. For a moment I just stood there, trying to take it all in myself, and then I lifted my faceplate and grinned.

\* \* \*

><p>While the fight for the region may have been over now, unfortunately for me, my own work didn't cease. Now that the mainland was secure, I had a plethora of other things to quickly get in order for the assault on Qamar...not to mention some personal items to take care of as well, to make sure I was up to the task. After issuing orders to both battalions' captains to give their troops some food and rest, I moved on to my next objective - checking in with Corpsman Michael Reynolds. I found him exactly where I thought he'd be: working hard inside the medical tent.</p>

As I pulled off my helmet, I could see the medic scrubbing blood off his hands by the tiny sink in the corner. Then he turned when he heard me enter and gave me a brief look of surprise.

"Major Cooper," he said with a small smirk. "I wasn't expecting you to come in on your own, ma'am. Thought I'd have to bitch and moan at you to get you to show up."

I shrugged. "Well, seeing as I've got about two weeks' worth of work to fit into the next couple days, I decided I'd get this out of the way first."

"Good thinking, ma'am. Where do you want to start?"

I sat down heavily on one of the cots and sighed as I ran a hand through my hair, truly worn out now. "I was hoping you'd tell me the condition of the corporal we tried to save in the woods last week. Is he doing any better yet?"

Reynolds's expression fell, and I already knew the answer. "No, ma'am. I'm sorry to tell you this, Major, but he didn't make it." It was the medic's turn to sigh now. "To be honest, I'm surprised he lasted as long as he did. We did our best, but he was critical the whole time. There just wasn't much left there to work with."

"Fuck," I murmured.

"You did what you could, Major - and more than was expected. Don't take it to heart."

"I know. I guess I was just hoping...after Hayden died, I wanted to..." Finally, I swallowed. "Nevermind."

"I'm sorry about the other major as well, ma'am, again," Reynolds said then. "I realize that must've - "

I held up my hand to stop him. "Let's just...not talk about that, Michael. I still...need to find some time to work through it."

"Right. So the next item on the agenda would be your gunshot wounds. How's your heart and shoulder feeling?"

"My chest feels fine. I haven't had any strange heart palpitations or anything lately. And my shoulder's been getting sore in firefights sometimes, but otherwise it's okay."

Doc Reynolds nodded. "That all sounds pretty normal to me, ma'am. Looks like you're healing up just fine." He gave me a look. "I wouldn't've guessed it when you got to the medical bay after those hits. But it's been a little over a month now. And based on what you've just said, I don't think you'll be needing those shots anymore."

I flashed him a small smile. "That's good to hear, Doc. Thanks."

There was silence for a moment, and then Reynolds raised an eyebrow at me. "I'm guessing there's one more thing you came to see me for, Major."

I tried my best not to look too sheepish. "Yeah. I was...hoping you could test me today." I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. "We're heading to Qamar next, and I need to know if I'll be leading that myself or manning a desk on the Affair. Preparations need to be made in case it's the latter."

"Of course, ma'am. I'll get you squared away. Have you been experiencing any symptoms lately?"

"Not really, but that doesn't mean much. I didn't get as sick when I was pregnant with the twins as I did with my first son and...the baby I lost."

Reynolds dug in his pockets for his datapad, then pulled out another small device. His gaze met mine before he spoke. "We'll do a blood test real quick to be sure. You'll know in a few minutes if you're pregnant or not."

I hoped my nervousness wasn't too plain to see. "Right then. Let's do it."

\* \* \*

><p>When I was finished inside the medical tent, I emerged with a lot of things on my mind, but I couldn't afford to dwell on any of it at the moment. I still had to speak to Colonel Laraza about the island, make sure the Marines were resupplied, check on my brother-in-law, and then get a hold of Willis to tell him the verdict.</p>

I sighed a second time. I could already tell it was going to be a long day, even though the fighting was finally over with.

Meeting with the rebel leader was easier now than it had been before the start of the truce, and I was promptly led to his tent. The difficult thing to negotiate this time was going to be holding off on getting too entangled in each other's business while I dealt with the situation on Qamar. I just had to make him see that although the larger threat was gone, there was still one last thing to be done here in order for the mission to be complete.

As usual, it was Giovanna Torri I saw first.

"Major Cooper," she said. "Colonel Laraza will see you now."

I gave her a small nod in return before stepping inside. "Thank you."

Once there, I was faced with an ever-hostile city mayor/insurgent commander.

"Major. What are you doing here? You must realize that now that the battle is over - "

"That the fight for the island has just begun," I finished. "You made the mistake the first time of letting it go. Now it's time to press the advance and eradicate the Storm's presence on the planet. Do you disagree?"

He looked at me with fire in his eyes. "I do, Major. This battle with the aliens has proven our strength, and our resolve. We will see the UNSC gone now that they have performed their duties here. Khan will be ours."

I folded my arms across my chest, unimpressed. "And the island?"

He waved a dismissive hand in the air. "Let the Remnant bastards have it. I do not care."

"Really? You do know that's where all the extra troops came from, don't you? You don't want that gone?"

"We will deal with the consequences ourselves."

I snorted. "Like you just dealt with this, you mean?" Leaning my hands against the table in front of him, I said, "This isn't a game, Laraza. You still need our help."

"Fine! What are your terms, then? What is the true cost of this 'help'?"

"All I ask is that you let my Marines do their job, unharmed, while we're on the island. An extension of our truce, basically. After that, it's not up to me anymore. It'll be up to the brass to decide what to do about our posting here, and that goes above my head."

Laraza smiled darkly at me. "At which point, we will become enemies once again."

"If that's what you choose to do. But I'd advise against that."

He scoffed. "Of course you would. You government types are so predictable."

"Just doing our jobs, sir. And as for me, I'm just trying to keep my people safe, like I'm sure you do for your own. I think that's a fair deal."

The rebel colonel mulled it over for a moment longer, then said, "Very well. We will allow your presence on Khan to continue, without harm, until you rid the island of the Remnant." He looked me in the eyes then. "However, if there is any attack towards my men at all from your troops, or if you fail in containing the situation there, we will attack again. Until you are fully removed from this planet."

"Right. Thanks for your help in the fight."

And with that, I slipped out, feeling more annoyed than ever with the chief insurgent. You should be thanking us for the help, I thought. We're the ones putting our lives on the line for you. We're the ones cleaning up the mess you left because you didn't want to take care of it before. I shook my head to myself. And yet we're the ones who have to beg to be allowed to come to your people's aid and save you. \_

\* \* \*

><p>It was only once all that unpleasantness was over with that I was finally able to go look for Willis and his brother. I knew my husband was groundside for now post-battle, waiting to bring me and the spook up to the <em>Suave Affair</em> to speak to Major Collins about the assault on Qamar.

I had to admit, as much as I disliked ships, it'd be nice to be on one for a day or two. I was damn tired of catching my only few minutes of shut-eye in the mud, slipping and fighting and bleeding in it for weeks on end. Getting a chance to be out of the elements for a bit was going to be a godsend, and for once, it didn't matter much that salvation would come in the form of the mode of transport I hated most. I was just ready to indulge in the luxuries of a hot meal, a warm bed, and a nice shower for once.

I found Willis and Matthew sitting on a charred redwood stump in the forest, surrounded by a few other Marines that were thankfully out of earshot. It didn't look like the two brothers were deep in conversation at the moment, but rather just taking a moment to enjoy the peace and quiet of nature now that the fighting was finally over - albeit nature that looked more broken and scorched than pleasant for now.

Willis spotted me first.

"Hey, Coop," he said, his expression brightening a little when I came into view. He stood from his blackened seat and came over to give me a hug.

Without saying a word, I hugged him back. Harder than I intended to,

and inexplicably, I felt tears start to form in my eyes. I was getting all emotional already, but I knew I had to put a clamp on it for a bit longer. So I did. I plastered a small smile on my face instead and forced myself to pull back. It was the first time we'd been able to physically touch in a long while, so it was hard to let go.

"Hey yourself," I replied. "It's good to see you face-to-face again."

"You, too, honey. I'm sorry for...getting testy when I came down last."

"It's okay. I'm sorry, too. I just...wasn't ready to deal with it yet."

"I understand. We don't have to talk about it until you're ready. I was just trying to help."

"I know. Thanks."

Behind us, Matthew cleared his throat.

"Hey, don't forget about me over here!"

I grinned over at my brother-in-law. "Hey, kid. You made it out okay?"

His uniform was torn and dirty, too, but not as bloodied as most of the others I'd seen. I figured he'd done his best to keep out of the way as much as possible, for Willis and I. He shrugged.

"I guess. I had a pretty close run-in with a Hunter last week, but I got through it. Conditions were rough, but it feels...I don't know. I don't feel as green anymore."

Willis gripped his little brother by the shoulder. "That's because you're not, little bro. Things'll be different from now on. But I still want you to try to be safe, all right? No rash moves. Promise me."

"Yeah, Will. I won't."

"Good." Then my husband glanced at me again. "Well, Cooper? Ready to get this show on the road?"

"Might as well. We need to do this fast if we want to have a shot."

"Okay. I'll call up the spook then and spool up the engines. Matt, we'll be back in a day or so, little brother. Keep out of trouble."

"Don't worry. I'll be fine."

"Right. See you later."

"See ya."

\* \* \*

><p>It was as Willis and I made our way to his hidden Pelican, retrieved from the <em>Affair</em> on his last trip up, that I thought of my test again. But when I opened my mouth to speak, for some reason I found I couldn't say the words just yet. So I changed the subject...sort of.

"Will?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you know what day it is?"

"February seventh. The twins' birthday. Why?"

A smile appeared on my face. "Hard to believe they're four years old today, huh? Doesn't feel like too long ago when they were still little newborns in diapers."

He chuckled. "Damn, were they a handful at once. But the best gift we could've gotten after the war. I miss them. And Gabriel."

"Me, too." My face fell. "I wish we could be back home with them now."

Seeing my expression, my husband quickly moved closer to put his arm around me. "Soon, Cooper. We just got one more fight left to finish."

#### 49. Chapter 48: Mission Assessment

\*\*Chapter Forty-Eight: Mission Assessment\*\*

Once aboard the Suave Affair, the three of us split up momentarily to get some essentials out of the way before the meeting - like getting clean and grabbing a bite to eat. I was absolutely starving myself, but I didn't want to show up inside the mess hall looking like I'd just rolled out of a trash compactor. And I was tired of being in filthy, soggy clothes. So the first thing Willis and I did was make our way to our quarters to dump our rank gear, and pick up a fresh set of fatigues.

Before he headed off to the male showers, my husband glanced back at me. "Meet you in the mess when we're done?"

I nodded. "Yeah. See you in a bit."

I could hardly describe how good it felt to finally be able to get clean. Even while we'd been posted on Columbia, showers had been something that were almost always at our disposal, and never something we'd had to go without. Only once the outpost had been destroyed had we been forced to live without the basics, and that had been three weeks too many. Especially considering how much it had rained or stormed during that time. Feeling the hot water and soap wash away the film of grime that had accumulated on me while in the field - dried mud and dirt as well as sweat and blood - was nothing short of amazing. When I emerged, I was left feeling rejuvenated - and I really liked that I didn't smell anymore, too.

After toweling off, I quickly dressed in my spare change of battledress uniform and combat boots, a new T-shirt, and fresh underclothes and socks. By the time I stepped back out into the corridors of the ship on my way to the mess, I felt like a presentable human being again.

Willis caught me walking down the hall, coming from the opposite side. He was freshly showered as well, clean-shaven now and in a spare set of clothes himself. As he approached, I caught a whiff of his soapy scent and thought he smelled absolutely wonderful. So when he came in closer for a quick embrace, I gripped the front of his uniform jacket with my fists and pulled him in for a deep kiss instead. He kissed me back. We were both smirking when we broke apart.

"Damn, Cooper," he said to me. "I've been wanting to do that for weeks now."

I chuckled. "Me, too. But there's more work to do right now. Everything else is going to have to wait."

My husband frowned. "We're still going to eat though, aren't we?"

"Of course. If I wait any longer for food, I might have to go cannibal."

"Let's get you to the mess then, Coop. Fast."

Inside the chow hall, Willis and I both earned sidelong glances for the heaping plates we brought over to our table. I didn't give a single crap. We'd been the ones fighting in nasty conditions on the ground for the last several weeks, while the Navy crew up here had been enjoying what was essentially shipboard leave the entire time. Both my husband and I finished off every last crumb on our trays, drank two cups of coffee each, and then, finally, it was time to go meet with his air wing commander.

\* \* \*

><p>When the two of us arrived at the small briefing room, I was surprised to find Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd already there. He was standing off to the side with his hands clasped loosely behind his back in his dark ONI fatigues, also freshly showered and changed, presumably waiting for us to start. Willis saluted his CO upon entry, while I simply gave the other major a nod and stood beside the bulkhead.</p>

Major Erin Collins acknowledged Willis first. "At ease, Captain Hawk." Then she turned to me. "Major Cooper, welcome."

"Thank you, Major," I replied.

Collins let out a sigh then. "I understand that things on Khan have grown infinitely more complicated since your units were sent dirtside. The outpost has been destroyed, Colonel Dwight is dead, Major Hayden was killed, and that leaves you as supreme commander on the ground, Cooper, in charge of both battalions and your husband's air squadron."

"That's right."

She looked over at the spook next. "But I see here from the intelligence report our esteemed ONI colleague was able to compile that you all managed to make it out okay, even when the Storm presence grew exponentially, by way of a truce with the rebels. And that the ex-Covenant have, as of now, been defeated on the mainland." The major looked at each of us in turn. "Do we know how or why this happened? How the enemy managed to amass so many troops?"

"Not yet, ma'am," Lieutenant Lloyd answered. "It's something I've been looking into, but still haven't gotten an answer on yet. That's one of the things we hope to find out when we get to the island."

"I see. And Cooper, I'm assuming you're here to request more air support?"

"Correct," I responded. "Will - uh, Captain Hawk and his pilots were invaluable to us in the forest, but to be honest, we're not exactly sure what we'll find on Qamar. Last time Lieutenant Lloyd was there, enemy strength looked pretty low, but that may have changed by now. And given that the terrain there is much more open than it was near Columbia, we can make better use of all our assets. We'll need extra Pelicans to carry those in." I folded my arms across my chest and sighed. "I'm going to request armor and vehicles be brought in for this assault as well, but I know that's not your department. If you can add some air power to our group, though, that would be much appreciated."

Collins smiled. "Of course, Major. It's what we're here for. You'll be assigned a second air squadron for the assault. When do you depart?"

I mulled it over for a moment. "I'm hoping to be back dirtside tomorrow. And I want to have everything ready to go by the next day. We've all had enough of this place now, and I think everyone's ready to just get this over with before the situation metastasizes again."

"Very well. I'll make sure the pilots are ready for you, then."

"Thanks, Collins," I said. "If you could just get them to standby for now, that's all I need. So long as they're ready to go at a moment's notice in case we need 'em."

"Consider it done. Anything else?"

I shook my head. "No. That was all."

"All right." Major Collins stepped forward then and held out her hand for me to shake. "Good luck, Major."

"You, too. Hopefully, this'll be the last of it."

The other major left the room with a final nod to Willis and the spook. My husband and Lloyd saluted her again, and then she was gone. In the meantime, I drifted over to the small table in the center and leaned back against it, arms still folded across my chest, staring down at my boots now.

"Something on your mind, Coop?" Willis asked.

"Yeah," I replied. "I keep thinking about the Storm's reinforcement trick. I still don't understand how the hell they were able to bulk up on their troops like that without a single enemy ship being detected. And that's got to be the only way they managed it, so how is that possible?"

"We'll find out once we're on Qamar, ma'am," Lloyd put in then. "I'm sure of it."

I finally lifted my gaze up and faced the spook. "Cal, can you project the latest map of the area you made for us?"

"Yes, ma'am. Right away."

I turned around and motioned for Willis to move in closer while the spook set his datapad on the table in front of us. At the press of a button, the most recent topo map of Qamar Island appeared in hologram form. Lieutenant Lloyd pointed to the lines.

"Captain, Major, as you can see, most of the terrain on the island is flat - not covered in trees like the mainland," he said. "There's places where the land undulates a little, but it's a very gradual rise and fall. Most of the ground is covered by a thin layer of soil, with sand and water underneath. Thus, not a lot of vegetation grows here, beyond a few palm trees and some shrub. And the weather's almost always nice and clear." He turned to look at my husband. "Hawk, this should mean perfect visibility for you and your pilots this time around."

Willis nodded. "That's good to know."

"And Major, for you, this'll mean you can make the most of your assets, as you already mentioned," the spook continued. "There's plenty of open ground here for you to use the motor pool and deploy armor as you see fit." He paused to look at me. "With the tools available to us now and the wide range of maneuverability, it shouldn't be difficult to gain the upper hand."

"Not to mention the Storm's low numbers," I added. Then I brought a hand up to my temple. "But that's only if they haven't found a way to bolster their lines again. If they have, it'll still be a tough fight. We're without the rebs' help this time, remember."

"Well, either way, Cooper, you know we need them gone," Willis put in. "If we really want this mission here on Khan to be over with, this needs to get done as well."

"I agree, ma'am," Lloyd said. "And it's imperative we find out what's going on with those ruins, and why the Remnant is so invested in this place. They've been sticking their noses in here since the Human-Covenant War, and they even just tried to take over the whole planet they wanted it so bad. Something important is there."

"And if it's important to the ex-Covies, that means it's important for us to destroy it." I frowned at the hologram in front of us, then made my decision. "I'll request two Scorpion tanks and four Warthogs from the motor pool to accompany us on the drop. And just in case

there's anything funky going on that we don't know about, I'll have two more tanks put on standby on the ship, ready to go if we need them, and two more 'Hogs. I think we should be good with that." I stole a glance at my husband and smiled faintly. "Besides, we got the best pilots in the Corps at our backs, too."

Willis smiled back. "We'll make it happen, Coop."

## 50. Chapter 49: Demons That Haunt Us

### \*\*Chapter Forty-Nine: Demons That Haunt Us\*\*

Two hours later, Willis was in bed asleep in our quarters, while I was still wide awake. Even though I was well past the point of exhaustion, I just kept thinking about the Marine who'd died after I tried to save him, about Hayden, and about the next upcoming phase of the mission - all of which kept me from catching any zees. After a while I got tired of staring up at the ceiling in the dark while my husband slept soundly beside me, and I quietly rose from the bunk and dressed in my T-shirt, battledress pants, and boots, then stepped out into the corridor.

I wasn't sure where I was going at first. There really weren't too many options aboard the ship, but eventually I figured I'd been through enough the past few weeks on Khan. It was time to try to get my mind off things, as much as I could now that I had a moment to myself. Almost subconsciously, I headed for the senior officers' wardroom.

It was nighttime aboard the ship - at least artificially - so there weren't any others inside. I approached the small liquor cabinet behind the bar and pulled out a shot glass and a bottle of whiskey. Normally I was more partial to beer than the heavier stuff, but after a battle like the one we'd just had dirtside, I needed something strong to ditch the memories. And the feeling.

I carried the bottle to the officers' rec room, slipping my dogtags underneath my shirt when their clanking was getting to be too much as I walked down the hall. Once inside, I paused for a moment to take in the room, which contained a only handful of Navy crew, then pulled the bottom of my T-shirt out from under my belt to relax and sat down to drink. Pouring myself the first glass, I picked it up and shot it straight down, making a face as the alcohol burned down my throat.

But it was a good feeling. It'd been too long since I'd had a real drink, and I had to admit that it hit the spot like nothing else. I quickly poured myself another, not really caring that I was slowly starting to garner the attention of the other officers in the room. Just before I took it in, though, I saw a dark-clad figure sit down beside me. It was Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd.

"Major Cooper," he said, holding up a drink of his own. "I'm guessing sleep isn't coming very easy to anyone tonight, huh?"

I snorted and downed my second shot. "Came pretty easy to my husband. I don't get how he's able to nod off at the turn of a dime and I can lie there for hours sometimes without sleeping a wink. Doesn't seem fair."

The spook chuckled, looking neither drunk nor sober. "Well, obviously I don't have any advice on how to change that, otherwise I'd be in bed myself. But I'd be glad to stay and share a drink, ma'am."

I held up my empty shot glass to him. "Cheers, Lieutenant."

"Cheers, Major. So what are we drinking to tonight?"

"Same as always, Cal. The dead. The reason we have booze in the first place." I contemplated the bottle of whiskey for a moment but didn't pour more yet. Then my voice went low. "Because sometimes pills aren't enough to forget the shit you see."

For the first time, I didn't feel bad about saying that aloud. Unlike other subordinates, I didn't have to worry about what I said with Caleb. Being a spook, Lloyd had access to that information anyway; the Navy lieutenant already knew the good, the bad, and the ugly when it came to me, even if he wouldn't - or couldn't - admit that to my face. I was sure he knew that I took meds for the nightmares so I could sleep...though on nights like these, obviously even that didn't help.

I found his full spectrum of knowledge a little trepidatious, but also very liberating.

"So you asked me when we were groundside if something like this had happened to me before," I said then. "You know about my parents. You know my oldest kid almost died. I also miscarried once." I had to pause for a moment to swallow the sudden lump in my throat before continuing. "You probably already know my older sister was killed in action around the time you entered the Academy. So I'm guessing you know I lost my other best friend during the war, too. First Lieutenant Dean Lewis." I finally poured myself a third shot and drank it. "He was like a brother to me. Just like Hayden."

Caleb took another drink himself, then asked, "What happened to him?"

"Dean died in Kenya, close to the very end." Another shot went down. "We were being charged by the Covenant and the Flood every which way. They were fighting us and each other and it was just a damn mess. Then our convoy got caught in the open on the Tsavo Highway on our way to Voi. One of the Scorpion tanks exploded right next to us. Knocked me out. When I came to, Lewis was almost already on the other side. Nothing left to do." I shrugged, starting to feel the alcohol a bit now. "I survived, and he was killed. Fucking gone. Just like that."

"Damn." The spook's face contorted for a second. "So you watched both your best friends die."

"Yup. Right in front of me, both times. Lucky me, right?" I took yet another drink. "You know I've got two brothers, too. A younger one and an older one. Losing Hayden was like losing Travis or Mark."

"I'm sorry, Major." He looked down at his glass. "I've had a lot of shit happen in my time as a spook, too, but I can't talk about any of it."

"It's okay, Lieutenant. I know that." I waved a dismissive hand in the air and came perilously close to losing my balance. "I probably shouldn't be unloading on you, either. But if it's stuff you already know, then why not?" I quickly poured and drank another. "Worse comes to worst you just won't see me as a saint anymore. We've all got our baggage to carry, rank or no."

"I don't think you're a saint, ma'am. It's just...with all you've been through over the years, I'm surprised at how well you keep it together. How good of a leader - and a person - you are. I think it's something to admire."

I snorted into my drink and then barked a laugh, giving Lloyd a sideways glance. "You call this together? Spooks must have pretty low expectations." I sobered a little - not me, but my expression. "Want to know a secret? I don't have some magic formula to the right way to approach a combat situation. Half the time I go with my gut and just pray it works. I have no clue what to expect on Qamar, and yet I'm expected to foresee everything and have to prepare for it as best I can. I'm a major in charge of something that should be up to a colonel or LTC to command. I keep seeing my friends die in front of me and it kills a part of me inside each time, too." I sighed. "Most of the time all I think about is how much I miss my family and how much I want to go home. I absolutely hate seeing any of my Marines get killed - even more so when it's some young kid I tried real fucking hard to save." I shook my head, running a hand through my hair, then said, "The worst part is knowing that no matter what you do, you can't save them all. You can't always make the right moves. And I still get scared sometimes that I'll make the wrong one."

Lieutenant Lloyd was quiet for a long time before replying. He'd stopped drinking by now himself, so he twirled the small glass between his hands on the table instead before looking over at me.

"Something they told us in ONI training one time, ma'am. 'You're measured by your intentions as well as your success.' If you have good intentions but fail every time, that's a poor record to have. If you succeed every time, but sustain huge losses because you don't care about what you have to sacrifice to get the job done, that's bad, too. You need that balance to be a good, respectable leader. A leader your men can follow and trust. And you've got that in spades, Major. Maybe you don't know for sure what'll work and what won't till you try it. But your instincts almost always guide you right. And I've seen that your troops really admire you for the attention and care you pay them. That's a rare combination to have."

He suddenly took in a deep breath. "I've told you what happened to my mom. Did I ever tell you what happened to my dad?"

"No."

"He just retired this year as a colonel in the ODSTs." He smiled briefly. "That's where my sister got the idea. But anyway, as a spook, I found out some things about him that he never told us growing up."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"This stuff just got declassified after the war, so it's okay to tell. But I found out my dad had been taken prisoner by the Innies. He was a POW for over five months while my mom was pregnant with me." He twirled the glass again. "And once I was born, it was my mom who got him out."

"Wow. Good for her."

"To read the files, apparently he was a mess when he got out, as you can imagine. The Innies...they did a lot of bad shit to him while he was in there. I saw some of the records. I know he went through a lot of psych evaluations as well as physical ones before he got put back on active duty." The spook looked at me then. "But before I knew all that about him, I never would've guessed. Despite what he went through, he was still the best dad he could be to us, even after Mom died." He smiled a little. "So you see? It's possible to overcome. You'll make it through. You have that same strength of character that my dad does. And that my mom did, too."

Though both my head and my vision were starting to swim now, I found myself smiling. "Thank you, Lieutenant. That means a lot."

Just when it looked like Lloyd was going to say more, a familiar voice sounded behind us. It was Willis.

"Natalie? Jesus, I've been looking all over the ship for you. What are you - "

Then he moved in closer and saw. I watched through my hazy vision as his face contorted into an angry expression.

"You're \_drinking\_? Dammit, Natalie, what if you're - "

I held up a hand to stop him, almost losing my balance a second time. "Don't worry, I'm not. Doc tested me today. No baby, so I can do what I want."

I couldn't quite be sure anymore since I wasn't exactly totally with it, but it seemed to me like my husband's face fell a bit. He looked oddly surprised.

"Oh. I thought..."

Lloyd suddenly looked like he wanted to be anywhere but here. "Uh, Hawk, ma'am, I'll see you in the morning. Have a good night. And thanks for the chat, Major."

"Anytime, LT."

As soon as the spook was out of sight, Willis sat down beside me in the seat he'd vacated. My husband pulled both the bottle of whiskey and the shot glass away from me and ran a hand over his face, then let out a sigh.

"This is about Hayden, isn't it? Your way of working through it?"

I shrugged, suddenly upset that the room wouldn't stop spinning even though I appeared to be sitting on something stationary. "Hayden. Lewis. The baby. That corporal who had his throat ripped apart by

needler rounds a week ago." Finally, I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Shit, Will. The list just keeps getting bigger and bigger, and they're not upping the dose on my meds to compensate. You went right to sleep tonight and I just...I couldn't. I kept turning everything over and over in my mind and it just - it got to be too much."

"So this is what you resort to? Getting drunk in the rec room?" He almost looked hurt. "Why didn't you talk to me about this instead?"

I felt the lump beginning to form in my throat again. "Because you were asleep, like I said. I didn't want to wake you up, but I didn't know how to - "

"Well, this isn't it." He sighed and stood. "Come on. I'll help you back to our quarters."

Turned out there was plenty of stumbling around involved with that, but eventually we managed. Once there, he sat me down carefully on the edge of the bed and took a seat beside me. Everything was swimming even worse by then, so I rested my head on his shoulder. Willis pulled me closer and squeezed.

"I love you, Coop. You know that. Whatever it is you're going through, whatever it is you're worried about, tell me."

Tears started forming in my eyes then, and I sniffled. "I told you. Everyone's who's died so far - "

"They're not coming back, Cooper. Hayden isn't, Dean isn't, the baby we lost isn't." He took in a steady breath of his own. "It hurts and it's sad and it sucks, but you need to accept that. Unfortunately this is just shit that happens in our line of work. And in life." He paused, then added, "I'm sorry about Hayden, honey. I really am. But you're not finding the right solution to the problem."

"I don't know if...I don't know that I'm in the right frame of mind to lead everything right now. So much is riding on this damn island assault. So many people looking to me to - "

"Shh. You'll do fine, Cooper. This type of thing has always been your bread and butter." He kissed the top of my head. "When you get knocked down, just get back up. I wouldn't want to follow anyone else, and I know your own Marines feel the same. Don't sell yourself short." His voice lowered then. "And if you need to let it all out, do it here, with me. Not out there. Okay?"

I nodded, and his words ended up being what finally broke the emotional dam I'd built up since Hayden's death. I leaned over to bury my face in Willis's chest and started to cry softly. Soon after that, I was full-on bawling.

For Oliver Hayden. For the young corporal Reynolds and I had been unable to save. And for everyone I'd lost since all these wars had begun.

\*\*\*\*\*Undetermined Shipboard Time, February 9, 2558. \*\*\*\*Onboard UNSC Transport Ship \_Suave Affair\_, In Orbit Above Planet Khan\*\*\*\*. "The Drop," Outer Colonies. Day Fifty-One of the New Age of Warfare\*\*\*\*\*

It had taken me much of the previous day to get over the terrific hangover I'd woken up with after my impromptu night of heavy drinking, painful reminiscence, and mourning in the rec room. Good thing I'd had Willis with me to make the recovery phase a little more bearable - and far more pleasant than it should have been. Now, though, it was bad to work, and preparations for our final assault on Qamar Island were already underway.

I presently stood on the deck of the port side hangar bay, dressed head-to-toe in full gear minus my helmet and weapon, and watched as incoming reports from Willis's Kilo Squadron flashed on a small console near the back of the massive room. Rather than return dirtside, I'd opted to remain aboard ship the last couple days to oversee preparations until everyone was ready to go pick up the Marines still on the ground. For now, pilots from my husband's squadron were making their way up as well to trade in their F-41s for Pelicans, so we could transport all our troops and gear to Qamar.

Beside me, Willis stood anxiously watching the console himself, wearing his flight suit.

"Damn," he said. "I'd like to be out there with them."

I reached over to gently touch his shoulder. "Soon, honey. And anyway, we haven't seen a Storm ship out here since before we arrived. They'll make it up here just fine." I smirked a little. "Now you know how I feel about having all my Marines groundside. It gets a bit nerve-wracking to be separated from your charge sometimes. But they know what to do."

Willis nodded but still looked slightly nervous. I found it endearing and smiled to myself.

"Major, Captain, Kilo Flight would like to inform you that they're about five minutes out now," a nearby Navy crewman announced.

"Thank you, Petty Officer," I said to him.

"No problem, ma'am."

As he scurried back to his other duties, I turned to face Willis again.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing. Just wondering if everything's packed and ready to go up here. You know we're going to need a few minutes to load up all the equipment and secure the tanks and 'Hogs to the undercarriage on some of the birds before we return groundside."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "We went over this stuff this morning. It's all ready." I took a quick glance around, noting that with the Navy crewman gone, everyone else on the deck was now out of earshot.

Then I leaned in a little closer to my husband and bumped him with my shoulder. "Come on, Will. I know you better than that. What's really on your mind?"

He let out a sigh. "The other night, when you said you weren't..."

"You were disappointed I wasn't pregnant." I gave him a look. "I may have been drunk, but I saw the look on your face. You almost seemed hurt."

"Heh. I'll admit I was surprised by the possibility at first, but then the idea kind of grew on me. I...thought it might be nice to have just one more."

I snorted. "The timing would've been terrible."

"Yeah. But it won't be once we're back home." His gaze met mine.  
"What do you think?"

"To be honest, I'm not opposed to the idea, so long as it doesn't interfere with any mission we're performing at the time." I briefly clasped his hand. "If it's something we both want, and duties don't get in the way, I think we can try for one more." Then I let go. "I'm back on my pills for now, and since I'm not taking anything for my heart anymore, Doc says they're fully functional. You know I have to be on them or use an alternative as long as we're deployed. But we'll talk about it again when we get home, okay?"

A small grin formed on my husband's face. "Okay." He shifted his stance a bit. "It doesn't have to happen right away when we get back, Cooper. I know you've been through a lot lately, and we still don't know what the real story is on the island or how that might affect things. But I just...wanted to put that out there. See how you felt about it. It's been on my mind lately."

"I know. It's been on mine, too."

The same Navy crewman returned then, right on time, and Willis and I stepped apart again.

"Ma'am, sir, Kilo Flight just requested permission to land. Thirty seconds." He looked to me then. "And Major? Victor Squadron is on standby in the starboard bay, as per your orders. They'd like to know if you want to begin embarking vehicles and gear."

"Tell them to do it, Landon. I want a Scorpion and two 'Hogs with them, and the same with Kilo. And tell Victor they can take whatever crates are already in their bay. Kilo will carry the rest."

"Yes, ma'am. On it."

Once he was gone, the remainder of the crew here in the port side bay got ready to receive the incoming flight of Broadswords - and made sure the pilots were prepared to switch over to the Pelicans once they landed. For that, I knew that both Willis and I had to get going to help.

Though I knew it wasn't strictly allowed on the deck, I leaned over to kiss my husband on the lips. This was it.

"I love you, Will. Stay safe."

He kissed me back, then said, "I love you, too, Natalie. And I will."

"See you on the ground soon."

"Sure thing, Coop."

\* \* \*

><p>Navy Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd arrived in the bay only when almost all the Pelicans were prepped and ready to go - I'd almost started to think he was going to miss his ride out. But just as I went back to one of the tables set up near the back to pick up my helmet and DMR, I glanced up and saw him walk into the enormous room.</p>

"Sorry I'm late, ma'am," he said, looking a little flushed. Then he smirked. "Wish I could blame it on traffic, but..."

"Uh-huh. Did you literally just sprint down here, Lieutenant?"

"Kind of. I know it's a silly excuse, but I was off-duty asleep in my rack and my COM didn't go off."

I actually laughed. "Well, hell, that's as good as any. Glad you made it, but don't let it happen again. We need you out on Qamar. You're our only spook."

"Yes, ma'am. Again, I apologize. I'm not normally this - "

"Just get on board, Cal."

"Right, Major."

The two of us loaded up in the same bird - one without a tank or vehicle attached below to make it a less appealing target, but it certainly still had a lot of equipment stored inside the troop bay. We took seats opposite each other in the Pelican, and then I had to swallow down the slight feeling of vertigo as it lifted off.

I must've been hanging onto the straps above the seat too hard, because the spook gave me a curious glance.

"Ma'am? Are you all right?"

"Yeah. I just get nervous inside ships of any kind. I don't like them, and they don't seem to like me too much, either." I smirked again to keep from thinking about the flight. "You can add that to your list of my bad leadership qualities. 'Drinks in excess and hates flying buckets.'"

I meant it as a joke, but Lloyd continued to stare.

"Really, Major? You don't like ships? But you're...married to a pilot."

"A fact my husband likes to remind me of every chance he gets. I still don't feel comfortable inside these things. One solid round and

you're gone." I shook my head. "I want to be able to fight back against whatever's trying to kill me. Instantaneous incineration is not my idea of a good time."

It was the spook's turn to laugh this time. "Ma'am, all due respect, but you know none of the UNSC's aircraft are that fragile. Unless something truly potent is deployed into the fight and you started off with a very weak hull."

"Still, I'm not taking any chances. I want my boots on solid ground, a weapon in my hand, and a target I can see and defend against myself."

"Fair enough, Major."

"Kilo Flight, this is Gold Leader," Willis's voice came over the intercom then. "We're on approach to our LZ on Khan. As per Major Cooper's orders, we'll be landing in a small clearing half a klick from the forest near Redwood Falls, and from there, we'll be picking up our Marines and head to the island. ETA to landing is ten mikes. Be ready."

Seeing as we were in atmosphere now, as soon as Willis cut the connection, I pulled my helmet on and tried to open a COM private channel to my XO.

"Captain Harris? This is Major Cooper. Are you receiving?"

The reply was a little garbled and static-filled at first, but eventually it cleared.

"Yes, ma'am. This is Harris. What can I do for you, Major?"

"We're en route to the surface now. Kilo and Victor Squadrons will be picking you up. I want the Eighth Engineers on Kilo's birds. Understood? I'm tagging their locations now."

"Got it, ma'am. I already have the battalion all packed up and ready to go, as ordered. Just waiting for our flight to get in."

I grinned. "Great work, Shawn. I owe you one."

Harris chuckled in return. "More than one, ma'am, but I'm not keeping track. See you on the ground."

"You, too, Captain. Cooper out."

From the other side of the cramped troop bay, Lieutenant Lloyd gave me a look. I wondered what reports or data he might've been getting, but for now I had one more person to check in with. I keyed the COM to Captain Roy Lamark this time - Hayden's XO, now acting CO of my late best friend's infantry battalion.

"Captain Lamark, this is Major Cooper. Please respond."

"Lamark here, ma'am."

"Good. I've got two squadrons of Pelicans inbound to this location," I said, using my datapad to tag it on his HUD. "We should be landing in about eight mikes. I want the 904th's Marines to get on Victor

Squadron's birds when we arrive. After that, we're bound straight for Qamar. Clear?"

"Yes, ma'am. Consider it done, Major."

"Excellent. See you in a bit, then. Cooper out."

\* \* \*

><p>The mood grew considerably more somber once all the Marines dirtside had boarded their assigned Pelicans for the flight to the island. I knew a lot of them were still worn out from the battle that had just ended a couple of days ago, and though they'd had the same amount of downtime as us, they hadn't had the benefit of a comfortable rest aboard ship like me and Willis and the spook had. For that I felt bad, and I hated that my rank now afforded me such a disconnect from their own experience. But considering all the top-level officers we'd lost recently, and the ease with which many of the preparations had been made once aboard ship as opposed to on the ground, it had been necessary to gather on the  
<em>Affair</em>.

Just before take-off, I'd issued orders to the battalion XOs as well as all the company commanders to be sure their men were fully resupplied from the fresh ammo crates we brought down. Only once that was complete had we left.

And now, we were on our way to Qamar.

With the troop bay inside the gear-packed Pelican full to the brim with additional Marines now, I felt even worse about the flight. But as I'd had to do many times in the past, I forced myself to swallow the feeling down and refrained from making any obviously nervous gestures in front of my men. To keep my mind occupied, I checked my datapad instead, confirming present rosters and looking over maps of the island for the millionth time each. It was only when I heard Willis's voice over the intercom again that I glanced up, gripping my rifle loosely between my knees.

"Kilo and Victor Squadrons, this is Gold Leader. We've got the island coming up on the horizon now. We don't expect any heavy anti-aircraft fire, but you never know. So strap yourselves in and get ready. LZ may be hot."

As soon as Willis's announcement was over, I opened up a general COM channel myself. "Marines of the Eighth Engineers and 904th Infantry, this is Major Cooper. You all just heard the announcement from Gold Leader: we're getting close.

"When we land, we'll be dropping in with some light armor and vehicle support, and of course our flyboys in the skies. The latest estimates show enemy numbers are low - much lower than what we just had to face on the mainland. But that's not to say the situation may have changed now. So be ready for anything.

"We'll also be splitting up the battalions on this one. Victor will be landing on the left side of the LZ, closer to the crest of the hill, with the 904th, while Kilo will be taking the Eighth in on the right. In doing so, we're hoping to avoid getting flanked ourselves and force the enemy to face us head-on, where we'll have the

advantage. The terrain will funnel the Storm into one large area for us to deal with, and we're more than prepared for it. Any questions?"

The COM was silent.

"Excellent. Then let's lock and load, Marines. Good luck, and semper fi."

"Oorah!"

After that, there were only a few more minutes till we were above the island. I spent a moment of the time looking down at the picture of my three kids that I always kept with me, then stuffed it back inside my helmet and pulled it on again. Beneath my boots, I started to feel the Pelican begin to sway this way and that as it passed above what had to be our LZ, but so far, there was no incoming fire that I could hear. Just to be sure, though, I opened up a private channel to Willis.

"Talon, what's it looking like out there?"

"Awful quiet, ma'am," he replied. "Nothing but dirt and sky so far. Definitely no welcoming committee."

"That's strange. I'm not sure how they would've known we were coming in advance, but the roar of this many Pelicans should've woken them up by now."

"Don't know what to say, Major. I guess you'll find out more when we land."

The slight feeling of unease I'd had about the island since the start began creeping its way through me once more. Even with Lieutenant Lloyd's recent trip out here, the truth was that we still knew nothing about what was actually happening here - other than that the aliens were highly interested in the real estate. I hoped the big reveal wouldn't come at the expense of many human lives.

A minute later, I clicked the COM again - as much to ease my own nerves as those of my men. "Marines, prepare to land."

Through the view on my helmet's tactical feed, I watched as Victor Squadron veered away from us, moving to the left like I'd ordered toward their own LZ. I switched views after that to my regular HUD display, then brought my weapon into my lap and gripped it tight as I felt our Pelican touch down.

The moment the hatch lowered, I hit the COM a third time.

"Everyone out, now! Let's move!"

I ran down the ramp with Marines pouring out in front of me and behind me, rushing into the bright sunlight of a gorgeous day on the island, guns raised. After two days spent aboard ship - and having dealt with weeks of rain groundside before that - it was nice to be outdoors again in good weather. The sky was a deep, happy light blue, no clouds in sight, and the thin layer of dirt under our boots was a tan rather than brown color due to the finely-ground sand beneath it. Almost a picture of paradise.

In the distance, I could hear ocean waves lapping at the shore. Taking a quick scan of the left and right, I even saw some short green grass trying to grow here and there on the areas of land with the most soil. There were also a few palm trees around, although they were scant near the LZ and seemed far away.

The scenery was undeniably nice. Yet so far, there were still no hostiles.

As I stood waiting for the rest of the Marines from the other Pelicans to disembark, I stepped slightly ahead of the rest and kept my eyes scanning for movement, and my ears perked up for sound. All I heard in the next few minutes though were the starting engines of the two 'Hogs with us - and then the tank.

"Ma'am, this is First Lieutenant George Abel, manning the big beast," a voice said over the radio. It was the Marine armor officer in charge of the Scorpion. "Where do you want us?"

"Hold position for now, Lieutenant," I responded. "We need to figure out where our gracious hosts are first. Standby."

While the Marine units were slowly getting spread out by company and then by platoon and squads on the island, I keyed the COM to both battalions' captains.

"Well? Anything yet? On either side?"

"No, ma'am," Captain Larmark returned. "Nothing to report for the 904th."

"Same here, Major," Captain Harris replied. "Don't see or hear anything incoming yet."

"Acknowledged. Let's get ourselves organized then and start moving up by company. Make sure the 'Hogs go first to scout ahead, then the Scorpions can move up next ahead of the rest. They're here somewhere, Captains. We just have to find them."

"Yes, ma'am!" they both answered.

"All right. Cooper out."

I cut the connection then, the feeling of unease settling deep in my stomach and souring. This wasn't how I'd envisioned things starting off. It wasn't a damn treasure hunt, after all. By all accounts the LZ should've been hot.

"Dammit," I muttered under my breath. "Where are they?"

The sun was warmer here than it had been on the mainland. I was starting to sweat under my uniform jacket and armor. But now wasn't the time to try to fix that.

I suddenly began to hear a sound like a distant wail - something that, curiously, I could hear above the sound of the far-off waves and even the engines of our vehicles that had already started to move ahead. Holding my rifle tighter in my hands, I turned to face the direction of the sound.

On our extreme right, the land rose ever so slightly, creating a bump we couldn't see around without moving to the edge. Instinctively, I trained my gun in that direction just as the creature making the noise appeared.

My eyes went wide when I saw it was a Grunt rushing forward with two brightly lit plasma grenades held high in the air, one in each hand. It took me a second to realize that it was fully expecting to die - and that it was hoping to take me with it.

"Oh, shit!"

I backpedaled fast and brought my DMR to bear, not bothering with the scope this time since the enemy fighter was so close. Squeezing off a few rapid bursts, I watched as some of the shots missed while I moved, but enough were still able to hit home to get the job done. The Grunt finally stopped screaming as it fell, its blood decorating the ground beside it.

Yet the blue explosives in its hands remained primed.

"Grenades! Hit the deck!" I yelled.

Two Marines closest to me joined me in taking cover against the dirt. The twin grenades burst an instant later, sending soil and sand and Grunt parts into the air. Thankfully, though, none of us were near enough to be hurt. But the Grunt's actions still left me perplexed as I got back up.

"Christ, Major," one of the Marines said to me. "I've never seen them do that before. That thing had to know he wasn't going to make it out."

"I've never seen it either, Sergeant," I replied. During the war they always scattered and ran or cried out when they were cut down, I thought to myself. They've never willingly just gone to their deaths like that. What changed?

"Holy shit! Major, watch it!"

I looked up from staring at what remained of the Grunt's body and my eyes got big as saucers - again. Coming up over the rise this time wasn't just one lone Grunt with an odd death wish.

There were suddenly tens of them, rushing at us and screaming.

## 52. Chapter 51: Leap of Faith 1

Author's Note: Sorry for the long delay on this, guys. Had a lot going on recently. But here, without further ado, is the next chapter. Hope you enjoy, and please let me know what you think! Feedback always helps the writing process. ;)

Thanks!

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><p><span><strong>Chapter Fifty-One: Leap of Faith, Part

One<strong>

The next battle began with the heavy sounds of an MBT's machine gun rattling hard against the sudden huge wave of plasma grenade-carrying Grunts headed up the rise. Between the small aliens' screams and the persistent clatter of noise coming from the Scorpion tank behind us, even my helmet's systems had a difficult time dampening the sounds. It felt like my entire body was inside someone else's mind in the middle of a bad migraine. But somehow, I pushed through it, forced myself to block out the distractions, and thought of what to do next.

"Marines, keep up the fire, but pull back!" I shouted to my men. "Let the tank handle it! Watch the explosives!"

In the meantime, I continued to backpedal myself, stopping every several feet to get a bead on a target and shoot it down with my DMR. It was when I finally heard the click-click of the empty rifle that I slung it behind my back rather than waste precious time reloading, and brought my sidearm out instead.

I was lucky, because that was also the moment the tank moved up ahead of us as the infantry moved back. Something like a thunk went through the air, and I knew then that our armor was firing not only its machine gun, but a large cannon round as well at the oncoming Grunts.

A string of loud detonations sounded just after the main Scorpion ordnance hit its mark. Tens of Grunt bodies burst high into the air, along with a generous helping of sandy dirt and entrails thanks to the numerous plasma grenades going off in tandem along the rise. It was a spectacle to see, but something I certainly could've done without. I braced myself against the rush of wind and debris that followed, bringing my arm up to cover my visor out of reflex.

When the smoke finally cleared, much of the small ridge was cratered, blackened, and littered with pieces of alien. Our tank's gun and main cannon ceased firing. Nothing else shot back or came at us...for now.

Recovering fast, I slipped my pistol back in its holster and used the brief lull to reload my DMR as I hit the general COM. "Marines, report!"

"No casualties, Major!" my XO, Captain Harris, replied. "Except for those Grunt bastards, of course."

"Great. Armor?"

"Doing fine, ma'am. Just thought we'd divert for a minute to give you a hand."

"Good thinking, Lieutenant. We appreciate the assist."

"No problem, ma'am."

Though my heart was still pounding inside my chest from the close encounter, I found the news momentarily comforting. I keyed the COM again. "Threat's been neutralized, Marines. All units continue the advance, but use caution. That definitely wasn't the last of

them."

Acknowledgment lights winked green across my HUD as I finished loading my rifle. I held the gun tight and close to my chest while I waved the rest of the men with me forward, sweeping my weapon from left to right to see if I could spot anymore oddball behavior from the Storm troops sure to still be roaming the island. I was relieved to find none for now, but kept my eyes peeled. This was just the beginning.

"Major Cooper, this is Lieutenant Lloyd. Do you copy?"

"Gotcha, Cal," I answered quickly as I continued to move. "What do you need?"

"Those Grunts that just attacked, Major. I've seen them do that before."

"You have?"

"Yes, ma'am. Storm Grunts, anyway. That's not a normal move on their part."

I snorted. "Well, I know that. I never saw them doing this during the war."

"That's my point, ma'am. It's an extreme action to take, like a last-ditch attempt. Remember that there's not that many Storm troops left here on the island, so their defensive options are pretty limited. We must be getting close to the ruins. I'll bet my pay they're trying everything they can to keep us out and away from the site."

"Right. I'm keeping an eye on it. Thanks."

The spook's thoughts on the Grunts' suicide tactics were intriguing. We'd known all along that the ruins held something of great value to the ex-Covenant in general, and to the Storm in particular. Based on what we knew of the newest sect's ideology, it wasn't that much of a stretch to think the ruins had some sort of strong religious importance to them. It was the "what" that was still bothering me, however. And now we knew for sure that the Remnant was willing to go to great lengths to keep us from figuring that out.

That just made reaching the ruins - and taking back Qamar - all the more imperative for us. I keyed the COM to my husband this time.

"Talon? You guys airborne again yet?"

"That's affirmative, Coop. We just watched the Scorpion blow the hell out of a ridge down there near the LZ. Need a hand with anything else?"

"No," I responded. "Well, not yet, anyway. I was just curious - can you see the ruins by any chance?"

"Nope. Not from here. We just turned our birds around to get into a good position for a flyby, so we're currently facing the opposite way from where the ruins should be. I'll let you know when we're on

approach and ready to provide support, ma'am."

I let out a frustrated sigh. "Okay. I was asking because some weird shit's been cropping up down here, and I'm really hoping it's not an island-wide thing."

"Like what, Cooper?"

"Like a massive wave of Grunts coming at us with primed plasma grenades in their hands."

"Holy shit."

"Yeah. Let me know the moment you get eyes on, all right?"

"You got it, Major. Talon out."

As soon as the connection cut, I found myself anxiously awaiting Willis's call letting me know he'd discovered the ruins close by. Because if we had to face these kinds of attacks the whole way, it'd be a very long mission - despite our greater numbers.

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><p>It didn't take long to find the remainder of the Remnant warriors after that. With such a large movement of troops, vehicles, armor, and air support, it was hard not to notice us anymore, and so the enemies that were left were finally forced to come out of the woodwork. Seeing that the kamikaze Grunts tactic hadn't worked, it seemed the Storm were going with the last option they could think of: a full-on assault against our forces. I got the heads-up via radio from the forward scouting Warthogs before I started to hear the sounds of unrestrained gunfire.</p>

"Major Cooper, we're coming up on some heavy resistance up the hill!" a young second lieutenant at the helm shouted. "Orders, ma'am?"

"Spray 'em with lead, Lieutenant!" I replied. "We've moving up on your six now to support! Standby."

"Aw, shit! Major, we've got more than enemy infantry up ahead! There's two Wraiths with Ghost escorts headed for us!"

"Hang on! The Scorpion's moving up alongside of you, so keep clear of the blast zones and let the armor engage!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

As I ran up the gradually rising hill with my Marines, I turned my attention to the right, where a sharp drop-off onto the sandy beaches of the island lay below, and then to the left, where the 904th Infantry Battalion was coming up on the flank with their own tank and Warthog escort. The two units were finally converging now, and I couldn't help but grin beneath my helmet despite the circumstances. We were all headed for the Storm - and it was only a matter of time before they were crushed.

Currently, our own Scorpion was making its way forward, gearing up to engage the armor and vehicles our alien enemy had entered into the

fray. Up ahead, I could already hear the fifty cals mounted to our 'Hogs tearing it up - and hopefully tearing some Storm baddies apart, too. But I also started to hear the Wraiths getting ready to launch a salvo of their own, and I knew it wasn't going to be pretty. I keyed my COM again to the lieutenant in charge.

"Anyone manning a 'Hog, watch it! Your tank support is not yet in position! I repeat, the tank is not in position! Clear the - !"

A horrendous crash sounded across the hill, and the ground shuddered beneath my boots as I jogged forward, almost making me lose my balance. I stumbled over the thin layer of grass and sandy dirt and caught myself right before I fell, keeping a tight grip on my gun so I didn't drop it, but some of the Marines beside me weren't as fortunate. They were pushed to the dirt by the force of the impact up ahead - just as a second shwoop went through the air. It sounded like both Wraiths were now on the offensive as well.

"Lieutenant, sitrep, now!" I shouted.

Over the radio, however, nothing emerged but static.

I got a terrible feeling of dread in the pit of my stomach as I watched the Marines around me who'd fallen jump back up to their feet and keep going. When I finally made it over the crest of the hill, my heart was thumping hard in my chest, but not from the run. It was from what I knew I'd see when I made it there, and I stopped dead in my tracks for a moment despite myself.

One of the Warthogs was no longer in commission, nothing but a flaming wreckage now, around which three Marines lay bloodied and dead in the grass - and not especially whole anymore. Red-orange fire licked at the sides of the vehicle, utterly destroyed by a smartly aimed Wraith tank blast. I stood there for just an instant longer, taking in the scene and sucking in a deep breath, and then the sounds of a new salvo coming in hot shoved me back to the present.

Somehow, when I became aware of my surroundings again, I saw that the Marine who'd just sprinted up to me was Staff Sergeant Porter. He gripped my good shoulder hard and gave me a shake.

"Major! We've got to move!"

I nodded briefly and forced my legs forward again. "Right, Staff."

I glanced around then as I ran, zeroing in on the other 'Hog, noticing that it was still functional and unscathed. That, at least, made me feel a little better. Still, the first thing I said over the COM channel after that was, "Michael, we need you up here. Now. Be careful, enemy armor hasn't been neutralized just yet."

The reply was nearly instantaneous. "Got it, ma'am," Doc Reynolds answered. "I'll be there in half a minute."

"And we'll have those Wraiths gone by then," I said softly, but the connection had already cut. "Tankers, what's the situation?"

"We're reloading the main cannon now, Major. Getting a bead!"

"Fire when you got it, Abel."

"Yes, ma'am!"

We were now getting closer to the main lines with the Storm infantry - almost about to go head-to-head. All that stood between us as a buffer now were our respective tanks and vehicles. While I watched, unable to get a target yet myself since we had to halt to let the vehicles duke it out first, I saw our last remaining 'Hog rip through one of the enemy Ghosts, making it trail electric-blue sparks just before it burst. The Grunt driver at the helm let out a loud wail as it was consumed in the flames, and I couldn't help but think of my three subordinates that had just endured the same.

"Serves that little bastard right," I muttered aloud.

Beside me, Porter raised an eyebrow. "Ma'am?"

"Nothing, Staff," I responded. "Just get ready. As soon as our Warthog and armor make us a hole, we're going through it. And finishing this."

Yet another Wraith tank blast came hurtling in amongst us then, forcing everyone to duck low and cover their heads as we waited for the huge plasma round to drop. It finally landed close to our 'Hog, upending it and spilling the Marines inside out onto the ground. From the sounds of shock, though, it appeared none were dead - only surprised or injured.

"Status!" I barked over the COM once the smoke cleared.

"Fine, Major! We're just without a heavy gun now!"

I heard First Lieutenant George Abel, in charge of our Scorpion, chuckle over the radio then. "Not entirely true, Sergeant. We've got plenty more where that came from. Just you sit back and watch."

With the 904th's Scorpion tank finally making its way to the crest too now, the two tanks worked in tandem and fired their cannons at once. I imagined that the large booms could be heard across the island, thought I couldn't be entirely sure. All I knew was that when the smoke cleared this time, there was only one Wraith left instead of two.

"Hell yeah! Take that, you son of a bitch!" Abel cried over the COM.

Though I was excited myself, I couldn't let the young lieutenant get carried away - or too confident. Not in a fight like this.

"Abel! Make sure you two take care of the rest before you celebrate! Get the job done, Marines!"

"On it, Major! Reloading now!"

But I knew that would take some time. Not a whole lot, but maybe a few seconds more than what we had - especially now that both our own 'Hogs were out of the fight, and the 904th's were still too far out to participate. This was going to be decided here, now, and I couldn't afford to keep all my Marines' asses hanging out in the wind as they faced both a Wraith and a Ghost on foot. So I keyed the COM

to my husband.

"Talon? You on station?"

There was a moment's pause, then, "Affirmative, ma'am. What do you need?"

"You know that support you were talking about earlier? We could really use it. Now!" Pulling a smoke grenade off my belt, I added, "Just follow the red smoke!"

"Got it, Coop. Coming in hot!"

Going against every natural and experience-honed instinct in my body, I sprinted up closer to the fight amid the chaos, primed the 'nade, and let it fly. It was hard to chuck it far with all the gear I had on, but I did my damnedest, knowing how much was riding on it. Then I hauled ass back to my own lines.

Soon, a burst of blood-red smoke filtered up into the air. Much to my surprise, it also had the pleasant effect of obscuring the Wraiths' line of sight, masking my Marines and I while pointing out the enemy's approximate location. Again, I found myself grinning.

Two birds with one stone, I thought to myself. Not fucking bad.

I could hear my pulse pounding in my ears when the sound of Willis's squadron coming in overhead finally overtook all the other noise around the battlefield. The payload was different this time since they were still flying the Pelicans that had brought us here, but the effect was the same.

With the Scorpions and men keeping well away from the area covered in a haze of red smoke, Kilo Squadron went to town on the final stronghold of the alien bastards we'd been fighting for weeks now on Khan. Explosions dotted the ex-Covies lines, sending the last Wraith into the afterlife first, then the remaining Ghosts, and then Kilo got to work on the infantry units as well. When all was said and done, nothing but ashy smoke - almost black this time - and the grotesque alien squeals of the dying could be heard across the open terrain.

Then our Scorpions moved in and opened up.

I thought I could hear Willis say something over the COM - whether it was to me in particular or just some celebratory whoop over the successful run, I didn't know. Mostly because I never made out the words over the tank cannon rounds getting launched, then finding purchase among the stragglers of Remnant troops that survived the bombing. As twin explosions sounded yet again, I found now that my ears were ringing too loud for me to hear much else.

But the grin remained plastered to my face. Because even though there was still plenty of mop-up work to do, I knew now that we'd won. Qamar Island was ours.

When my hearing finally returned and I could hear myself think, I opened a general COM channel and yelled, "Nice work, Talon! That did it!"

Willis's voice was more smug than usual this time when he replied. "Always glad to be of service, ma'am. And by the way, we've got eyes on the ruins now, just to let you know. You should be able to see them yourself in the distance."

I glanced up then, not simply looking down the barrel of my DMR for once, and spotted it: the building or buildings on the horizon that the Storm had not only overtaken the island for, but also nearly all of Khan. The ruins they'd wanted to keep exclusively for themselves since even the War. To complete our mission, we had to find out what was in there...and what the Remnant had fought so hard to protect.

But first things first. Before we made anymore attempts at moving forward, we had to finish clearing the path. And that meant taking care of any remaining ex-Covenant that hadn't been completely torn apart by the blasts.

To finish up the objective, I opened a channel to all the Marines again. "Tanks, stay put and watch our six. Kilo and Victor, amazing work today. I can't tell you how much your support helped. 'Hogs and Marines of the 8th Engineers and 904th Infantry Battalions, move up. We've got a few more aliens we need to put down before we can get to those ruins ahead. Get your weapons reloaded, and let's move."

Just as I started to move again, though, another officer hailed me.

"Major Cooper? This is Captain Cole Warfield of the 904th."

"Go ahead, Captain."

"I've uh, I've got some news, ma'am. It seems that Captain Larmark was killed in the fight just now. I think he got hit by one of the Wraith tank salvos."

I let out a sigh of frustration. "You think or you know, Warfield?"

"I know, ma'am. Sorry. From radio reports. He was a confirmed casualty, Major."

"\_Shit.\_" That now left the infantry battalion not only without a CO since Hayden's death, but also without its acting CO as well.

"Ma'am?"

My second sigh was masked by the sounds of gunfire that cropped up around me again - my Marines handling the stragglers. "Nothing new here, Marine. I'm sorry to hear about Lamark, but we've got to go on. And that means you're in charge now."

"Of the whole battalion, ma'am?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Major, I don't - "

"The words you're looking for, Marine, are 'yes, ma'am.' You're next in line, Warfield, so the job's yours. That is all."

It was the captain's turn to sigh now. "Right. Yes, ma'am. I've got it."

"Good. Cooper out."

As soon as the connection cut, I gripped my gun a little harder and stared at the grass beneath my boots for a moment. This was an added complication I hadn't wanted right now, and sure as hell didn't need. But fate rarely asked you what you were comfortable handling when it spun its web. So for better or for worse, we were down to the wire now as far as commanding officers went.

Something I hoped would be remedied as soon as we got off this damn island and this god-awful planet - and finally went home.

That started - and ended - with the ruins that loomed up ahead.

### 53. Chapter 52: Leap of Faith 2

\*\*Chapter Fifty-Two: Leap of Faith, Part Two\*\*

Walking through the remains of the fight wasn't any easier than those I'd been involved in in the past. Even the heat was something I'd experienced many times before in abundance. So once the last remaining stragglers of Storm troops were disposed of, I slung my rifle behind my back for a moment to roll up the sleeves of my uniform jacket, instantly feeling a little better as a light ocean breeze came in to pick up the slack. The sweat was already beading on my forehead beneath my helmet, and I could feel that my T-shirt under the jacket was damp. There wasn't a whole lot I could do about it until we were back aboard the Suave Affair, though.

Hopefully, that would be soon. I glanced up at the horizon again and saw the ruins once more in the distance. That was our last destination here - the final piece of the intricate Khan puzzle we'd slowly been uncovering since our arrival. What we found there could determine what would happen to the planet after we left.

But of course, we had to actually get there first.

As I stared down at a few of the casualties from the battle in the dirt - both Marine and alien - I brought my weapon down off my shoulder and opened up a general COM channel to my Marines.

"This is Major Cooper. Now that the Remnant has been dealt with, we've got an open shot at the ruins. So let's go check them out, Marines. As before, the 'Hog will scout the terrain ahead, make sure there aren't anymore enemies hiding out near the objective area. It's highly probable, so stay sharp. Next will be us, then the Scorpions. Our air support is also still on station, so if necessary, we can call in a strike. But we have to be careful about that around the site - I want whatever's left over there to be kept intact. Is that understood?"

Acknowledgment lights winked green across my HUD. I nodded to myself

inside my helmet.

"Good. For now, I want the 904th to hold here with your assigned vehicle elements. One battalion up there will be enough, and I want us to have a fallback point in case anything unforeseen crops up near the ruins. Captain Warfield, make sure your battalion is prepared for that, and set up a perimeter around the crest of this hill for now. Be on the lookout for anything."

"On it, Major."

"For the rest of you - namely the 8th Engineers - we're up. Lieutenant Lloyd, you're also coming with us."

"I will, ma'am," the spook replied.

"All right. Let's get going then. There's still plenty of work to do on the island. Cooper out."

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><p>It was sad to see the effects of Kilo Squadron's air assaults and the Scorpion tanks' blasts on the land. The dead, mangled Storm bodies and haphazardly strewn vehicle parts I didn't care so much about, but it struck me as somehow wrong that we'd left the once-beautiful island landscape ravaged by our fight. A couple of palm trees stood just four feet off the golden-tan ground, their tops blown away just like the enemy corpses nearby from the successive explosions; all that remained were charred stumps sadly sticking up from the earth.</p>

Besides the displacement of alien bodies, equipment, and the local flora, the terrain itself was blackened as well. Several scattered craters carved out deep gouges in the grassy, sandy dirt of the hilltop, transforming the calm, quiet paradise into nothing but yet another bloody battlefield.

As I stepped up closer to the edge of the drop onto the beach below on my right, I felt a momentary sadness grip me as I looked out towards the water. By all accounts, at least thanks to the weather, it was still a gorgeous clear day here on Qamar. It'd been us and the Storm with our weapons and warfare that had tainted it. I began to wonder if this was why the alien bastards had tried so hard to keep things on the island under wraps. Maybe to them, we'd just desecrated holy ground. I was almost sure of it. That would definitely have explained the tough resistance on the mainland, and how hard they'd tried to keep us off "their" turf.

But I still didn't think that that alone was enough to justify an attempt at taking the whole planet. I understood protecting the ruins themselves, but not the entire sphere around which they were placed - especially considering that during the War, the Covenant hadn't bothered to spare the other half of Khan from a brutal glassing. Something bigger than that was here, and I knew all the answers lay up ahead.

After moving back from the steep drop, I continued on my way again, gun held a little looser in my grip now but still ready to use in case of trouble. I was walking alongside my aide, Staff Sergeant Porter, and his squad - all of whom were very conspicuously forming

up around me for protection - when I came to a halt again and hailed the spook.

"Cal, it's Major Cooper. Go ahead and move up to my position, Lieutenant - it's all clear so far. I've got a few questions I want to run by you before we approach."

"Yes, ma'am," came the reply. "Moving now."

The Naval officer did a good job of jogging up to me fast, something that was both appreciated and necessary considering I didn't want to be stopped out here too long without knowing what was going on at the ruins. Since the battle had ended we hadn't seen or heard so much as a peep from anywhere else on the island, but like when we'd first touched down, I knew the silence didn't mean an absence. It could just as easily mean that there was more to face up ahead, and that they were in hiding. So I went with my gut and kept my guard up.

"You asked for me, Major?" Lieutenant Lloyd said when he reached me. By now he was gripping his own rifle tight in his hands, too, noticing that I wasn't looking as relaxed as I should be given the fact that we seemingly had the island to ourselves.

Yet still, despite the victory, I just couldn't shake the bad feeling I had.

"I did," I answered, then waved at him with my free hand. "Walk with me."

"Sure thing, ma'am."

I took him over to the edge of the drop off, where I'd been a few minutes earlier. From there, I slung my DMR on my good shoulder and pulled out my field binoculars from one of my cargo pockets, motioning him to do the same. "Come on, Cal. I know you brought some of that ONI tech with you. Put it to good use."

I said it with a small grin to try to lighten the mood, even though we both knew this was serious business. I'd never ignored my instincts before, and as Lloyd had said to me himself the night I'd gotten drunk in the rec room aboard ship, they'd rarely steered me wrong. The lieutenant did as I asked without a word, and studied the ruins too through the zoomed in sights.

"See anything yet?"

"No, ma'am," the spook replied. "Quiet as a damn tomb over there, and a lot less movement, too."

"Same. Looking at the size of the ruins, how many ex-Covies do you think could still be holding out in there?"

I saw Lloyd shrug in my peripheral vision. "The ruins don't seem terribly large on the surface. A company's worth of Storm troops, maybe? Probably more like half that, ma'am." He finally brought the binoculars down and sighed. "But that's just an extremely rough estimate. For one, we don't know how large the original building actually was - obviously, the ruins are only what's left of it, not what it used to be. Second, we really have no clue what's underneath

us. If that thing stretches beneath the ground - and I know from ONI's files that these things typically do - it might even be as large as the whole island."

\_Shit,\_ I thought. "From your experience, what could we have going on under the hood?"

"A large chamber could easily fit underneath this hill, Major. Or it might just be a series of pathways with secret exits throughout the island." He glanced up at me from his boots. "It's really a very smart set-up on their part if that's what they've got to work with. That way, your enemy would never know your true number, nor would they know where to expect you to pop out next. The Remnant could even be coming up behind us right now and we'd never realize it because it'd all be happening underground."

I blew out a breath. "Wonderful. So we might just get surrounded soon and have another large-scale fight on our hands?"

"Not necessarily, ma'am. Could also be there's not much down there and most of what we see up top is all there is."

Snorting as I put my own binoculars away, I found myself shaking my head. "You know I don't buy that, Lieutenant, and I'm sure that neither do you. Our best bet is to hope our approach rattles a few feathers and that whatever's hiding out by the ruins comes to us. We just have to make sure we do it in a way that we're prepared for whatever emerges."

The ONI operative cocked his head to the side and looked at me. "What are you expecting to find exactly, Major?"

"I don't know, Cal," I responded sincerely. "But I do know that I don't like what I've seen here on Khan so far. Suicide attacks, an attempt to take the mainland and the whole damn planet, a suddenly increased force of Storm troops appearing out of thin air with no signs of a transport ship anywhere in space to drop them off." It was my turn to give him a look this time. "None of it adds up so far. But I know in my gut that the answers are all here on Qamar, right underneath our noses. And they're in those stupid fucking ruins."

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><p>Coming up on the ruins, I had a fleeting moment where I wondered why the place that held such a great religious significance to the Storm didn't look all that sacred to me. In the Inner Colonies I'd been to, back on Earth and my homeplanet of Mars, churches and synagogues and temples and mosques were all pretty clear about the fact that they were important to someone - the intricate designs, the colors, the ornate windows, the blatantly front-and-center symbols. These ruins didn't hold any of that for me. They only looked like so much rubble, like what I'd seen dozens upon dozens of times before in my campaigns against the Covenant when we'd been sent in to help out a city under attack, only to find most of it already gone before we came in to bolster it. And above all, it felt alien.</p>

For some reason, all the thoughts on the Remnant's religious motivation made me think of Hayden. He'd never been a very spiritual person himself, but now that he was dead, the thought came to mind: I wondered what he would've done here in my place. How he would've

handled the initial landing on Qamar, and the approach to the ruins now. I figured he probably would've done a better job than me.

I swallowed down the sudden lump in my throat and pushed the painful, intrusive thought aside. My best friend was gone. I'd never see Oliver again. Whatever he may have done differently in this situation was lost to the wind now, nothing but a passing blip in my brain. And that made the harsh ache in my chest at his absence hurt deep.

It was funny. I'd been able to more or less recover from a bullet to the chest. But this was going to take much, much longer to heal.

A voice through the open COM channel brought me back to the present then.

"Major, it's Sergeant Cody in the 'Hog up front. We've got some, uh, strange activity over here, ma'am."

I glanced up in the head vehicle's direction in an instant, rifle raised. "What kind, Sergeant?"

"I don't really know yet, ma'am, but they're not former Covenant."

My blood ran cold. "Flood?"

"No, ma'am. Not them, either. I just noticed the things flying around now near the ruins. But they haven't attacked us so far."

"'Things', Cody? You want to be a little more specific?"

"They're almost like...small helicopter things twirling around, Major. Better if you see it."

I was already zooming in on the ruins with my weapon's scope as he said the words, but I couldn't make much out beyond some buzzing shapes. We were still too far out. "Link me into your helmet feed, Sergeant."

"Yes, ma'am. Right away."

I crouched down lower into the grass on the hill and motioned for Staff Sergeant Porter and his squad to tighten up around me as I focused my attention on the images coming through my HUD. I couldn't do that and keep a sharp eye out for trouble at the same time, so to keep from having to escape death by the skin of my teeth for the umpteenth time, I chose caution over multitasking. What I saw through the live video feed was intriguing.

Flying around just outside what looked to be the ruins' entrance were two small drones. They didn't appear to be organic, but they were still alien - to us at least. I'd never seen machines like that, and wondered if they were maybe holdovers from when humans still had control over the island, or whether they were new low-tech AI entities the Storm had employed as security around their sacred site. Given the fact that weren't attacking us on sight, however, made me question the obvious assumption. But I still didn't want my Marines lowering their guard around something foreign.

"Cody, I see it now. You say they haven't done anything to appear

hostile to you yet?"

"That's affirmative, ma'am. We're not quite at the ruins' doorsteps yet, but so far they haven't paid us any mind."

I let out a sigh. This could get complicated real fast. "Well, we have no choice but to continue the approach, Sergeant. We still need to know what's inside. If these things are some kind of monitoring device or something, we'll find out quick. We just have to be ready for it. Move it up slow, Marine, and make sure your gunner's prepared for whatever comes next."

"Got it, Major. We'll let you know shortly."

"Right. Cooper out."

Anxiousness swept through me as soon as the connection cut. The live feed blinked off my HUD and was replaced by the normal view of what was in front of me once more, but I couldn't help but feel like some sort of conflict was imminent. I hoped I hadn't just sent the Marines in the scouting 'Hog to their deaths.

To keep my mind off my worries, I got into motion myself again. I looked over at Staff Sergeant Porter while I straightened. "Josh, I think we might have some trouble up ahead. Nothing reported yet, but I'd like to give that 'Hog some backup just in case."

"Understood, Major." My aide adjusted the grip on his SAW. "If I may ask, ma'am, what did they find?"

"Something new. I want to be sure that - "

That's when I heard the sound of the Warthog's mounted fifty cal open up at a frenetic pace out in front of us. A few seconds later I heard a muted explosion, like a hot metal pop, and then another. In a matter of seconds I was lunging forward, trying to get closer to the entrance of the ruins where the sounds had come from, but Porter caught me just as quick and grabbed hold of the back of my torso armor to stop me.

"Major, please, wait for us! It's not safe!"

I gave him a hard stare in return. "Then move it, Staff!"

Running up with Porter's squad around me this time, we got to scene just in time to find two smoking heaps of metal lying near the idle 'Hog. The Marines inside all looked panic-struck. There was no sign of the flying things anymore, so I guessed these were it. I looked to the sergeant still sitting in the passenger seat.

"What the hell happened here, Cody?"

"They started to fire once we got closer, ma'am! Some sort of...orange laser thing. We had to take them out before they killed us!"

"Dammit. Now everyone that might be in this damn place know we're here."

Acting fast, I gave orders to Porter and his squad to take cover just

outside the entrance, with the staff sergeant in the middle gripping the SAW. Crouching down in the rubble beside him, I pressed my back hard against the ancient pieces of building and opened up a general channel. "8th Engineers, you better haul ass to the ruins, now! We've encountered some sort of new hostile machine and we don't know yet if they're just AIs with security protocols or if they're something completely different. Approach with caution, but get here fast! Tankers, we need you up, too! Cover our six!"

It was just as I was hunkering down myself once the connection cut, bringing my DMR to bear and facing the entrance in anticipation of more enemy troops showing up, that I saw more of the flying drones appear. They came up out of the entrance in twos and immediately began to fire on our position...but this time, they weren't alone.

Something else appeared from the ruins, too. Something tall I'd never seen before in my life, and something that was neither Storm nor Flood, though they reminded me vaguely of Elites at first glance.

I didn't end up getting a good look beyond that, because now we were too busy trying not to get shot. And fighting back.

Tagging one of the flying things first with my DMR, I squeezed off a series of bursts and yelled loud over the noise, "Marines, return fire!"

The drone I was aiming at exploded quickly enough, raining down hot debris on our position as my bullets overtook it, yet the others remained unscathed. In seconds I heard the Warthog's fifty cal rattling hard again behind us, and then Porter opened up with his SAW right next to me. Still, that big tall alien thing was headed right for us. And firing pulses of light rounds from a gun I'd never encountered before today.

For a moment while I ducked back behind my cover to reload, I wondered if this was how the men and women who'd first fought the Covenant on Harvest all those years ago had felt. Terrified, and way out of their element, facing a new threat that they had no idea what capabilities it possessed, or if their counterattacks would work.

But then I realized that we had more than a leg up on those who'd come before us. We had almost thirty years of warfare with the Covenant under our belts to assure us that we could face an alien threat head-on and win. Humanity hadn't won the war without help, but I knew we could pull together again if we had to. And for now, all that mattered was winning this one fight - not an entirely new war.

"Keep firing, Marines!" I shouted as I aimed my sights on the big guy now. "Keep firing!"

With the fifty cal's help, most of the drones had bitten the dust around us now, nothing but bundles of smoking scrap metal like the first pair that had greeted my Marines outside the entrance. But that didn't mean that those that were left were going to flee because of that. They were machines, not people or ex-Covenant, and so they were unfazed by those kind of psychological cues.

Even as I pulled the trigger then, I was struck by something odd. The drones seemed to be circling the big thing that had emerged - obviously allies. Was it an AI that was part of the security protocols here, too? Mechanical helpers the Storm had created or enlisted for their own cause? Or was it something I hadn't even thought of yet?

My mind ceased going places in an attempt to make sense of what was going on in front of me when the tall, sentient robot went lunging through the air. Surprising all of us, it leapt clear over me and Porter and the rest of his squad posted at the entrance, and went instead directly for the Marines on the 'Hog - the object that was causing his flying friends the most trouble. Opening up with the odd weapon in its hands, it made quick work of all three men in the vehicle, including the gunner. By the time the rest of us had turned to help, the others were already screaming in pain as the new gun ripped into their protective gear with no remorse. And then they were dead.

My eyes went wide at the sight of three Marine bodies hanging limp from their harnesses inside the 'Hog, their blood splattered across the interior and dripping down onto the grassy dirt-sand below. It wasn't that I hadn't seen dead bodies before. It was the manner in which they'd died - and how fast.

Staff Sergeant Joshua Porter reacted to the deaths first, letting out an enraged howl I hadn't heard from him even in Voi five years ago, and he opened up again with a devastating hail of bullets at the thing that had just killed a whole fireteam in the blink of an eye. The alien machine tried to fight back, and the drones in the air did what they could to cover, but the rest of the Marines and I made equally quick work of them to protect my aide.

Once those were down, the tall thing was damaged and had nothing left to help itself. A final volley of lead from all of us finally put it down, and it suddenly warped into a thousand bright orange fragments of light, then disappeared.

The only thing it dropped in the sandy dirt was its gun.

When it was all over, the remaining Marines and I simply sat there catching our breaths for a long time. Even I didn't know what the hell to say. So many questions were floating through my mind now that it'd take a nuke going off to stop them. Or at least a very large explosion.

Of course all eyes were on me in the sudden silence. The bodies of three of our Marines lay bloodied and lifeless behind us, and the collection of still-warm metal parts were strewn everywhere around the entrance. And then there was the bizarre-looking gun lying on the ground where the big mechanical fighter had once stood.

A lot of weird shit, and only one major.

"Ma'am?" a bright-eyed corporal from Porter's squad crouched next to me asked. "All due respect, but what the fuck was that?"

"I have no idea, Corporal," I answered.

"Uh, orders, ma'am?" another Marine asked.

Gingerly, I risked getting up a little higher from my position and looking around. Nothing else emerged from the entrance, or the rest of the ruins. \_Maybe it all really was just a leftover security detail,\_ I thought. \_Or maybe it was a new watch dog mechanism the Remnant have developed. Maybe it's not all as big and far-reaching as it seems. \_

But then there was that nagging feeling I had in the back of my mind again, telling me none-too-subtly that none of this felt familiar. It felt new. \_And I really have absolutely no clue what this is. But maybe the spook does.\_

Turning to face my men, I said, "Your orders are the same, Marines. Engage and take out all hostiles. We need to fan out and make sure the rest of this area is clear before we go in. You see something bad, shoot it. After that, we'll set up a secure perimeter and I'll send a team in to investigate what's going on inside, if anything. And from there, we should figure out what the hell we just fought." I glanced at Porter. "That starts with you, Josh. Make sure the entrance is green."

My aide nodded slowly. "Yes, ma'am."

"Pick up that gun, too. I want to make sure our spook sees it when he gets here."

"Right away, Major."

As things slowly began returning to normal, I opened up a COM channel to Lieutenant Lloyd first, making sure he was on his way up along with additional Marines. After that, I got on the horn to Willis.

"Talon?"

"Yeah, Coop. I'm here."

I snorted. "Where are you off to, Captain? Sightseeing?"

"No, ma'am. We're here and ready when you need us. Just thought you wanted to keep us away from the ruins is all. Collateral damage and such."

I shifted my stance. "To be honest, I'm less concerned about that right now than I am at what I just saw."

"What's that?"

"No clue. That's the thing. I'm getting our spook to come check it out. Maybe he's seen this kind of thing before."

There was worry in my husband's voice now. For me, and for the rest of us. "Natalie? What exactly did you see?"

"I could send you my helmet feed. That'd be easier than describing it."

"Was it the Flood?"

"Nope. We've dealt with that before. This wasn't it, thank God. Wasn't Covie, though, either."

"A new breed of \_alien\_?"

I chuckled at that, but it was mostly humorless - because organic or no, he could be right. "Will, I said I don't know. And I'd rather not jump to conclusions right now. There's a lot this could be, so just let the ground teams handle it. We'll figure it out and I'll let you know, okay?"

A long pause followed, then a resigned sigh. "Fine. What did you need from me, then?"

"Could you do a quick flyby over the ruins? Make sure there's nothing hiding out anywhere ready to bag us?"

"Sure thing, Major."

"Thanks, Talon."

"And Natalie?"

"Yeah?"

"How are you doing? Are you okay?"

The smile that came to my face was a weak one, but there nonetheless at his concern. "I'm fine, honey. Just a little weirded out."

#### 54. Chapter 53: Got A Feeling

Author's Note: Well guys, this is it. The last chapter of the story. I really hope you've enjoyed so far, and I hope you like this one as well. Please let me know what you think! And be sure to go on to the Closing Author's Note when you're done.

Thanks so much for reading! :D

P.S. Chapter title comes from the song of the same name by Sevendust. I'd recommend giving it a listen as it goes well with this chappy.

\* \* \*

><p><span><strong>Chapter Fifty-Three: Got A<strong>\*\*  
Feeling\*\*

\*\*\*\*\*1523 Hours, February 9, 2558. Qamar Island Ruins,\*\*\*\* Planet Khan\*\*\*\*. "The Discovery," Outer Colonies. Day Fifty-One of the New Age of Warfare\*\*\*\*\*

"Wow. Would you get a load of this."

Standing silently by with my DMR held loosely in my hands, I watched as Navy Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd surveyed our surroundings by the entrance to the ruins. Behind us, almost two platoons of Marines were making their way around the objective area, making sure everything was shipshape - and that there were no more surprises ready to be sprung upon us from the ancient locale. Further beyond that, the rest

of the 8th Engineer Battalion was cautiously but quickly heading our way as well. So far, so good, I thought. Which was the complete opposite of what I'd been feeling several minutes ago in the midst of the skirmish.

"So?" I asked the spook then, taking care that my rifle's barrel was pointed low towards the ground while I shuffled my feet in the dirt. "What's your expert opinion here, Cal? Have you seen anything like this before?"

I couldn't help but feel like my heart dropped when the lieutenant shook his head.

"No, ma'am. I've analyzed some of ONI's reports on other sites like this that the UNSC has found before, but I've never seen this." He indicated the cooling fragments of metal around us that used to be the drones, then the awkward new gun in his hands. "And you say this AI thing just...vanished after you killed it?"

"Yeah. Pretty much. You want to see my helmet feed?"

"Eventually, yes, ma'am. But not now." He gave me a look. "Based on what we found here, I think you should make a copy of it and upload it to the Affair, ma'am. HighCom needs to see this. I'd package up the gun we've got here, too."

"That important, huh?"

"Absolutely, Major," Lloyd replied with conviction. "Everything here tells me these weren't just security drones, ma'am. They're neither UNSC nor ex-Covie tech. This is brand-new shit."

Just like I thought. Somehow, though, the confirmation didn't sit well with me.

After allowing the spook another few minutes to look over the debris, I got his attention again and motioned him a little further back from the others so we could briefly speak.

"Well, Lieutenant, obviously I'm a bit out of my element here," I said to him once we were out of earshot. Slinging my DMR and putting my hands on my hips, I added, "I'm open to suggestions on how to proceed if you have any."

He thought for just a moment before replying. "I still think we need to go through the ruins, ma'am. Especially in light of what was just found outside. To be honest, all this is as fresh to me as it is to you, Major."

I smiled wryly. "That's what I was afraid of."

"What are your orders then, ma'am?"

"I need to get a hold of my husband first, see if anything's cropped up on the aerial recon. If nothing has, I'm going to pick a team and station the rest of the 8th Engineers here, just outside the entrance, to keep things secure while we're inside."

"You're going in, too?"

"Yup. And so are you, Cal. Come on."

Only once we got back to the others did I open up the COM channel to Willis.

"Talon, it's Cooper."

"This is Talon, Major. Calling for a sitrep?"

"Yeah. How's the island looking from up there?"

"Well, I've got Victor up above the 904th right now, ready for support in case something comes up that way," Willis responded.

"Thankfully it's been quiet there so far."

"Good thinking. And Kilo's run?"

"We just flew over the ruins twice now, Coop. We got nothing."

"So that means whatever we've got is underneath us," I mused aloud.

"What's that?"

"Don't worry about it, Will. Just keep up your surveillance of the ruins. I should stay in radio contact even from inside, so let me know the instant you see something crop up. Got it?"

"I will." There was a moment's pause, then, "Natalie, if you're going in there, promise me you'll be very careful."

"Always am, honey. Cooper out."

I hated keeping Willis in the dark, but there was so much going on now that nobody seemed to understand, so I figured my attempts at an explanation wouldn't do anything but make him worry. Before we could get to the comprehension part, we had to find out what was actually happening here...and what exactly it was that we were facing.

To that end, I glanced over at Staff Sergeant Porter as I stepped past him.

"Staff, gear up and get your squad ready to go. We'll be heading in in five, just as soon as our perimeter is established."

Porter nodded to me sharply in acknowledgment. "Yes, ma'am."

"Lloyd?"

"Major?"

"You, too, Lieutenant. Get ready."

"On it, ma'am."

As the squad of Marines and the spook began to prepare to enter the ruins, I walked several feet ahead and stopped by the wreckage of the 'Hog, where the bodies of the three Marines slain by the new AI enemy still lay sprawled in their seats. Having moved up now with the rest

of the engineers, Corpsman Michael Reynolds half-stood, half-crouched beside the vehicle, busily collecting dogtags and placing them in the breast pocket of his uniform.

"Doc? You almost finished there?"

He seemed startled by my voice at first, but then he turned around to face me. "Yes, ma'am. I just...well, there wasn't anything left to treat on them, so I'm grabbing their tags."

I stepped up closer to place my hand on his shoulder as I released a sigh. "I know. I'm sorry you had to deal with more of this today. And I wish I could tell you that this was it, but..."

"I understand, Major. Job's not over yet."

"Nope. Sadly, it's not." I took a deep breath. "I want you to come along with us into the ruins, Reynolds. Just in case."

"Of course, ma'am. I'll be ready."

I nodded. "Good. We move out in a few minutes."

After that was done, I finally hit the COM again and opened a general channel. "Marines, this is Major Cooper. We've encountered some very light resistance near the ruins, but it seems we're treading new territory here. The hostiles we fought were neither Storm, nor human, nor Flood. So to everyone, I say this: watch your six, and don't hesitate to shoot anything that doesn't come up as friendly on your HUDs. We don't know what we're dealing with yet, but we're looking to remedy that shortly.

"Captain Warfield, I want the 904th to hold right where it's at. We still need that fallback position ready to go in case we need it. Captain Harris, you have the 8th Engineers while I venture inside the ruins with our team. Make sure a secure perimeter is established and maintained around the site while we're inside. If anything happens out here, I want to be notified immediately. Is that clear, Captains?"

"Yes, ma'am!" the pair said in unison.

"Okay. Beyond that, you know you have some vehicle and armor support, and both Victor and Kilo Squadrons are on-station for help. If shit hits the fan hard, don't hesitate to use 'em. Cooper out."

As soon as the connection cut, I turned and brought my gun closer to my middle, preparing to go back to where my Marines, ONI operative, and medic stood waiting to go inside the ruins. Instead, I stopped in my tracks as a familiar face stood before me now.

Dressed in dirt- and blood-covered fatigues like the rest of the Marines, Matthew Hawk grinned at me. "Hi, Nat."

"Hey, kiddo," I replied, a little astonished. Then I got a better look at him. "Jesus, Matt. Are you okay?"

His grin faded slowly from his face. "I'm fine, Natalie. Blood's not mine. How's my big brother?"

"I just talked to him. He's circling up above us right now with his squadron. How...how did you get groundside?"

"Snuck aboard one of the Pelicans. It wasn't too hard. I've done it before."

"Why am I not surprised?" I blew out a breath and gave him a sidelong glance, faintly amused. "Your brother's going to kill me when he finds out you're down here. You know he wanted you to stay aboard the Affair. Knowing Will, he'll think I had a part in this, and there goes all our progress."

"Oh, don't worry about it. If he comes to hear about it I'll set him straight." He gripped his MA5D tighter. "Just didn't want to miss out on the fun."

"Well, you're lucky to be alive after what we faced, kid. What do you need?"

"I wanted to go into the ruins with you guys."

At that, I snorted instantly. "Right. No. That's final, Matt, and you already know why."

"Come on, please? I can help, Nat. You know I can."

"You can help me by staying alive and out of trouble while we're in there, so I don't have to worry about being served with divorce papers along with possibly getting killed."

Matthew made a face. "Natalie, you know my brother would never do that to you."

"No, but I don't doubt it may have crossed his mind in the heat of the moment. Those are the kinds of things I'd like to avoid going forward."

My brother-in-law's face went from a wince to a smirk in less than a second. I had to admit I was impressed. "I bet you don't have anyone on your team right now who's a Khan native, though."

I frowned. "Nice try, kiddo, but technically you're not one, either."

"Maybe not, but I've spent the majority of my life here. This is where I grew up. Got anybody else who can say the same?"

The sigh that escaped me was a purposefully loud one. "No."

"So let me tag along. It'll give you guys an edge."

"Like it did with the rebs?"

"This is different. I promise. I'm better at fighting now, more experienced. I won't be a burden."

I took a look at his bright brown eyes imploring me to let him in on the action, and refrained from snorting again. "A couple fights do not a veteran make, kid." Then I shifted. "But you're right. We've got no locals on the team right now. It may or may not help, but

considering we have no clue what's happening at the moment, it couldn't hurt." I wagged a finger at him. "Just make sure you run it by your brother first. I won't okay this without his blessing. I like being married to my husband."

Matthew rolled his eyes at me. "Fine."

"If he says yes, you know where to meet us. And don't try to lie to me to weasel your way in. I'll be monitoring the channel in the background."

"You can do that?"

This time, it was me who grinned. "I'm a major, kiddo. It comes in handy sometimes."

\* \* \*

><p>Ten minutes later our team set off - a bit behind schedule, but nothing we couldn't make up for later. One of Porter's Marines was up at point with the staff sergeant right behind him, then me, then Lieutenant Lloyd, then Willis's younger brother and Reynolds. The rest of the squad brought up the rear.</p>

As we stepped carefully through the threshold, I wondered what my brother-in-law had said to convince Willis to let him accompany us inside. I'd kept a sharp ear on the conversation as promised, waiting for my husband to say no and for Matthew to emphatically interpret that as a yes to me, but something must have finally struck a chord with Willis. He'd eventually acquiesced without a major argument on Matthew's part. I wondered if it meant that Willis was finally coming to terms with the fact that his baby brother was a little boy no longer, and could now handle himself on his own and make his own choices. I was proud of my husband for that, but even more, I was glad because it meant that we'd have a lot less friction between us on this subject in the future.

So long as a future was actually in the cards - for any of us. Seeing what we'd faced today, and still not having a damn idea what it'd been, I had my doubts.

"So, Matt, tell me," I said while we continued to walk through the rubble. "You think you'll formally enlist in the Marines when we get home?"

My brother-in-law smiled. "Heck yes. I like this a lot better than being with the rebs."

"Yeah....I wouldn't advertise that if I were you."

Matthew's voice went sheepish. "Oh. Right. Well, you think they'd take me?"

I shrugged. "You've already got some training and experience under your belt. And it's not like we've got people lining up at the door anymore for enlistment. I'm sure you could waggle your way into a PFC rank off the bat."

"What's that?"

"Pretty much the bottom rung. But everybody's gotta start somewhere. Most Marines are privates through training. You'd already have a leg up on them."

He thought a moment, then asked, "You think my big brother would go for it?"

"Maybe he won't, but I think he understands now that you're more or less grown up. He might not be happy about it, but I don't think he'd try to stop you if that's what you really wanted to do."

"I do, Nat," he said firmly then. "I really do."

"Then get after your dreams, kid." I smirked faintly beneath my helmet. "But we gotta make sure we survive this first."

"Heh. 'Kay."

We all kept our weapons trained ahead and to the side of us, turning on our flashlight attachments once the insides started getting too dark for us to see. I briefly helped Matthew with his, then continued to scan the narrow hall for signs of activity. There were none so far.

It didn't take us long to come to a set of terribly old stairs on the brink of collapse. They were clearly in rough shape, but when Porter and the Marine up front tested them with their boots, they found it held their weight. gingerly, they descended, and the rest of us followed them down.

I immediately found it strange that the air wasn't humid and damp in the chamber below. I'd been underground before, in bunkers, Flood hideouts, and Covie outposts. This, once again, felt different. Despite the ruins' obvious age, the air didn't feel stagnant or stuffy. It just felt...there.

The chamber we were in was large, as the stairs had gone down a long way before we'd touched level ground again. When I glanced up, I could barely see the ceiling from the floor, even with the enhanced vision in my HUD. I realized almost right away that I should've ordered a bigger team of Marines in here. A lot bigger.

I keyed my COM. "This is Major Cooper, inside the structure. We need -"

I paused as I spoke. Something was wrong. My helmet's radio wasn't working anymore. Lifting my faceplate, I turned to Staff Sergeant Porter in front of me.

"Staff? Is your COM working?"

"No, ma'am. Just tried it myself. COM's down in here."

"Fuck." I turned to one of the Marines behind us. "Corporal, get back up top, on the double. Tell them Major Cooper gave you orders to get another platoon of men down here. Now."

"Yes, ma'am!"

I didn't envy the Marine the task of going back up all those stairs,

but we all had our part to play. While I heard him begin to dash up the stairs behind us, I turned back to face the humungous underground chamber we were in and slowly started to walk around.

Then I instantly froze in place and brought my gun up when the previously pitch-black space was brilliantly lit by tens of lights.

"Where the hell did that come from?" I shouted.

"I don't know, ma'am! Place is secure," Porter announced. "I don't see any hostiles on our scanners."

"Check again!"

"On it!"

"Marines, spread out, in twos! But don't get too far ahead of one another! I don't want to lose anybody in this place, and that'd be pretty damn easy given the size."

Acknowledgment lights winked green across my HUD, and we kept looking for the source of the lights...and who'd just activated them. After several long minutes of searching, however, nothing substantial was found.

I had a choice now. I could either end the search now in fear of an attack, or I could have us keep going in spite of all the weird shit going on. The decision was tough, but in the end I figured we couldn't afford to ignore this place any longer.

"Let's continue checking out the chamber, Marines. Keep your eyes peeled for movement and your ears alert for sounds. Other than that, we need to see what we've got down here."

Now that the area was lit, that was admittedly a lot easier to do. Our helmets' systems and weapon lamps could only get us so far; this was what we'd truly needed to get a good look around.

The first thing I noticed about the place was that walls surrounded us on all sides. The chamber was circular. It was also enormous in scale, but I found that I could see across it, which meant it wasn't nearly as massive as I'd initially thought. There didn't seem to be any obvious points of exit around besides the stairs, but of course that didn't mean there weren't any doors built into the wall itself. That was something we'd have to search for more carefully once we had more Marines down here.

For now, I turned to Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd and got his take on it.

"Well? Anything seem familiar to you, Cal?"

Surprising me, the spook shook his head. "No, ma'am. Not yet. I mean, I've read some intel reports about places like this, but - "

The lieutenant stopped suddenly and, eyes going wide, jogged straight for the nearest wall. I went after him, gun up just in case since I wasn't sure what had disrupted his thought, but then I relaxed as I realized he just wanted a closer look at the ancient partition.

"I told you there'd be something under the island," Lloyd breathed.

I snorted. "No. You said there may or may not be. I was the one who figured this all along."

"I meant I told you there could possibly be a chamber here, Major. And look. Check out these markings."

When I stepped in closer, I finally saw what he was talking about - what had made him so excited to come see. There were symbols on parts of the wall. Glowing symbols.

"What the hell are these?"

"I don't know, ma'am. I - " His face screwed up in thought. "Wait. No. I think I've seen something like this before."

"Well, now's the time, Lieutenant."

But the ONI operative only whispered, "Oh, wow. Now we know how the Storm were getting so many troops on the mainland. Holy shit."

"How?"

"I've seen pictures of this stuff in ONI files, ma'am. I'd just forgotten about it for a sec. They're rare finds, but now that I think about it, the UNSC discovered something similar on a world called Trevelyan â€“ formerly known as Onyx. It's an ONI research facility now, highly classified. I shouldn't even be mentioning it to you, but I think you need to know this. There were ruins much like these on the surface, and it was discovered that they held portals to other worlds across the galaxy inside them." He snorted. "Only problem was, nobody knew where they went. If a person went through, they could end up damn near anywhere." Then he suddenly turned and gave me a look. "You were searching for an answer as to how the Storm kept multiplying in number while we fought them, Major. Can you think of a better way to get reinforcements in right under the enemy's nose?"

I stood in utter amazement at everything as I stared and slowly took in his words. "No, Lieutenant. I can't." It was my turn to look at him then. "I also can't think of a better reason to come running to the mainland, either. Is this where you think our new mechanical friends came from, too?"

"Could be, ma'am. But that I can't say for sure."

After another extended moment of awestruck oogling, I finally made my decision. "You were right, Cal. We've got to get these images up to the Affair. Send them to HighCom. They need to know what we found here."

The other thing I suddenly realized was that the possibility of going home soon - so likely just hours before - was now very remote. More than what we'd just found, my heart wrenched in my chest at the thought. Willis and I had been separated from our kids for almost four months now. Most days I'd only been able to get through it

because I knew we didn't have much of our mission here on Khan left to complete, that we'd get to see the three of them shortly. Now, all of a sudden I knew with certainty that that wasn't the case. We'd be on Khan for a lot longer now. The USNC wasn't just going to let something like this go.

"Ma'am?"

Lieutenant Lloyd's voice broke me out of my thoughts, and I swallowed on the lump in my throat.

"I'm okay, Cal. I just - "

That's when we all brought our guard up again at the noise. Every single one of us searched the chamber walls, but we couldn't find anything that might've made the sound. Then I glanced over at the spook. He was holding his battle rifle with white knuckles.

"Shit. Major, I think they're coming back."

\*\*THE END\*\*

#### 55. Closing Author's Note

\*\*Closing Author's Note\*\*

Didn't think I'd end it on a cliffhanger, didya? ;)

Well, much like the other Cooper stories, I wasn't expecting to continue after this one. I left the possibility open, but didn't start out the story with the idea that I'd be going on to more in the future. Sometimes it just ends up working out like that.

So, I'm going to keep this short and sweet. \*\*Thank you so much to all my faithful readers and reviewers, both old and new.\*\* I'm glad you've been enjoying the stories as much as you have, and I hope you liked this one as well. \*\*These tales would not be possible without your support, so I thank you again for all your feedback, favorites, and alerts.\*\* It helps me make the fic what it is, and gives me the drive to keep delivering these stories to you. It's been a blast, as always, so thanks for joining me on the ride.

As for the next tale, stay tuned. I should have something up soon.  
:)

End  
file.